PLAYBOY

SPRING 2026

Karol G

WOMAN ON TOP

Photographed by GRAY SORRENTI

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Venus de Milano

For Great Playmate Search winner **Ines Trocchia**, la dolce vita continues. The Italian talk show host, sports broadcaster, and content creator beat out scores of contestants to claim the Inside Cover spot in *Playboy*'s inaugural digital-only Great Playmate Search. (You can meet the Playmate Pictorial winner Lauren Summer on page 80.) Since making her debut in *Playboy Portugal* in 2017, Trocchia has built one of Italy's most recognizable media profiles, including jobs at two of Italy's biggest television networks as well as campaigns for brands like Dolce & Gabbana and appearances in *Vogue*. Photographer Alana O'Herlihy captures her here in a shoot that pays tribute to her timeless appeal—and the world-famous work of former *Playboy* contributor Alberto Vargas.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALANA O'HERLIHY

STYLIST: LANA JAY LACKEY. SET DESIGN: MILENA GORUM. MAKEUP: KAYLI DAVIS. HAIR: RACHEL LITA. MANICURIST: NATALIE MINERVA. STUDIO: NOVA STUDIOS LA. PRODUCTION: PERFECT PROJECTS. THE GREAT PLAYMATE SEARCH JUDGES: SHANNA MOAKLER, BRANDE RODERICK, DAPHNÉE DUPLAIX, SUMMER ALTICE, AND GILLIAN NATION.

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Playboy c/o MaryAnne Tongko at 10960 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 2200, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

For the Love of *Women*

THAT WAS THE RALLYING CRY for this, our spring issue, as our team at *Playboy* grappled with the question of what it means to be a man today. What do men want? What do men need? And, given this is a magazine, what should men read about?

More often than not, the answers led us to women.

Or to be more precise, to one woman in particular—the Grammy Award–winning Colombian global superstar **Karol G**, who graces our cover, shot by **Gray Sorrenti**. The artist sits down with **Paola Ramos** to discuss her headlining performance at Coachella and how it feels to be a visible icon for the Latino community in our time of polarization and vilification. Karol looks incredible in her story (page 92), but it's her deeply held clarity about her role in the world that really resonates.

Sitting down for the *Playboy* Interview this issue is actress **Nia Long**, whose upcoming role in *Michael* will win your attention (page 146). Nia's wide-ranging conversation with **Jamilah Lemieux** offers a tender insight into the rarest of things: a long and hard-won career in Hollywood. (You can watch their conversation on *Playboy*'s social channels too.)

Also in this issue, our senior editor, **Magdalene Taylor**, alongside her team of intrepid reporters, takes on the question every guy is asking: How do you actually meet women in 2026, off your phone and in the world? Inside (page 44), there's everything from perfecting the art of seduction to handling rejection like a man. You'll also find a deep dive into the world of artificial intelligence and intimacy—and what it's doing to our partnerships (page 126). And in a delightfully twisted journey, **Camille Sojit Pejcha** boards a cruise for swingers and tells all (page 64).

If that sounds like a whole lot of reading, don't worry: You've got plenty to look at. We're bringing you **four new Playmates**—Misses January, February, March, and April—who add a whole lot of heat and a little dash of humor to our most iconic franchise. All our Playmates for this issue were photographed by women, including **Alana O'Herlihy**, whose Miss February shoot reimagines the pinup paintings of Alberto Vargas as actual photographs. And there are even more bodies to behold in a series of photo essays from some of our favorite photographers (pages 132 and 162), none of whose subjects were shy about being seen.

So what does it mean to be a man? There's no single answer. But we think this issue is a pretty good place to start looking.

Phillip Picardi
Editor-in-Chief

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MAXWELL POTH**

CONTRIBUTORS

Asher Perlman

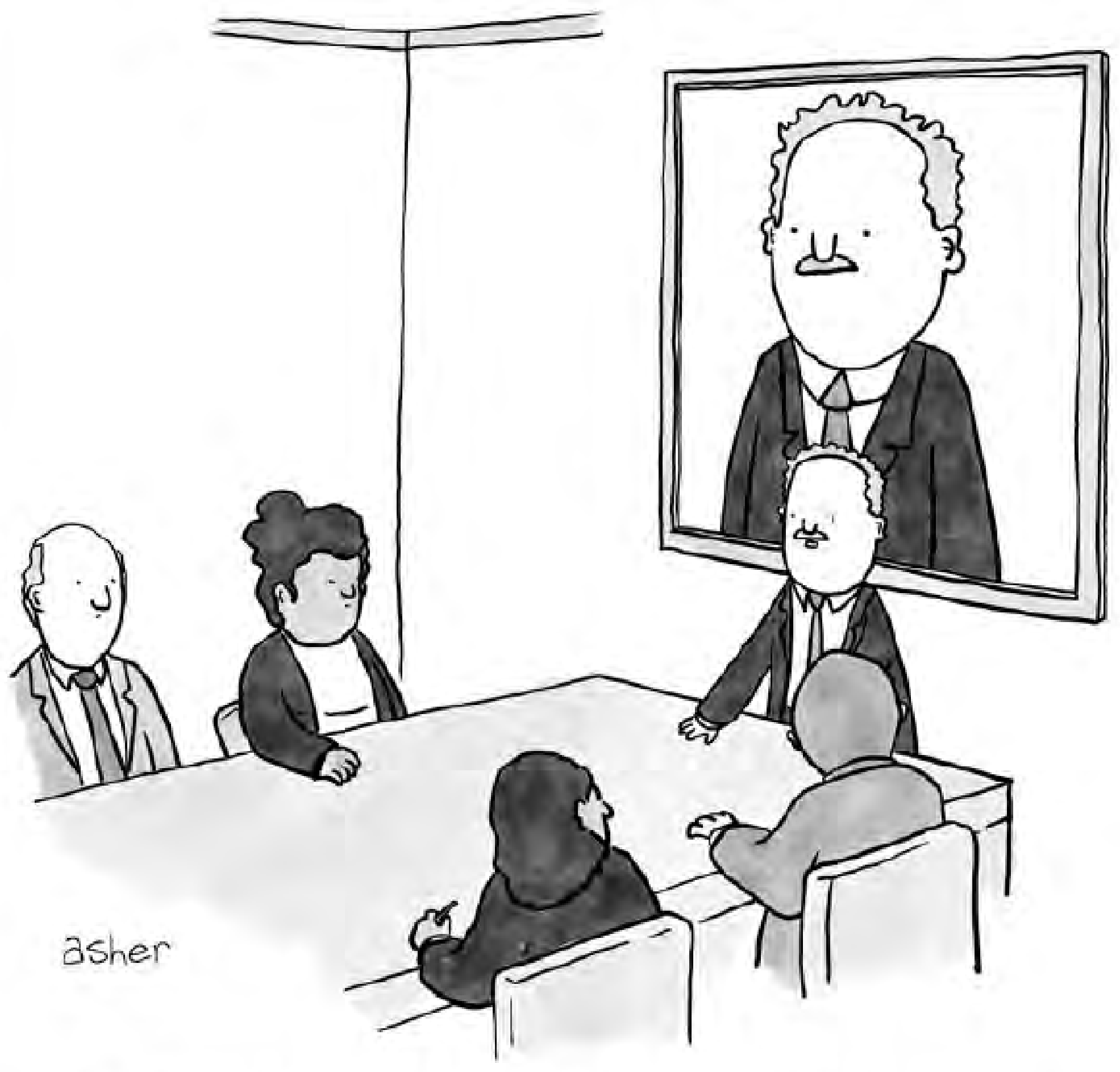
When **Asher Perlman** got the call to be *Playboy*'s cartoonist in residence, he did what any diligent artist would do: He went digging through the magazine's archives of single-panel gags, some of which caused him to blush, he says. But he found no reason to adjust his approach. "As far as I'm concerned," Perlman says, "funny is funny." His cartoons, found throughout this issue, prove it: bone-dry humor with characters (sometimes animals) saying the truth out loud.

Cartoons have been integral to this magazine since its 1953 debut: Shel Silverstein, Jules Feiffer, Gahan Wilson, and Buck Brown are among the luminaries who've contributed over the years. But never before has one artist been responsible for every cartoon in an issue, a distinction that puts Perlman in rare company. "It's a gig and an honor," Perlman says with a laugh.

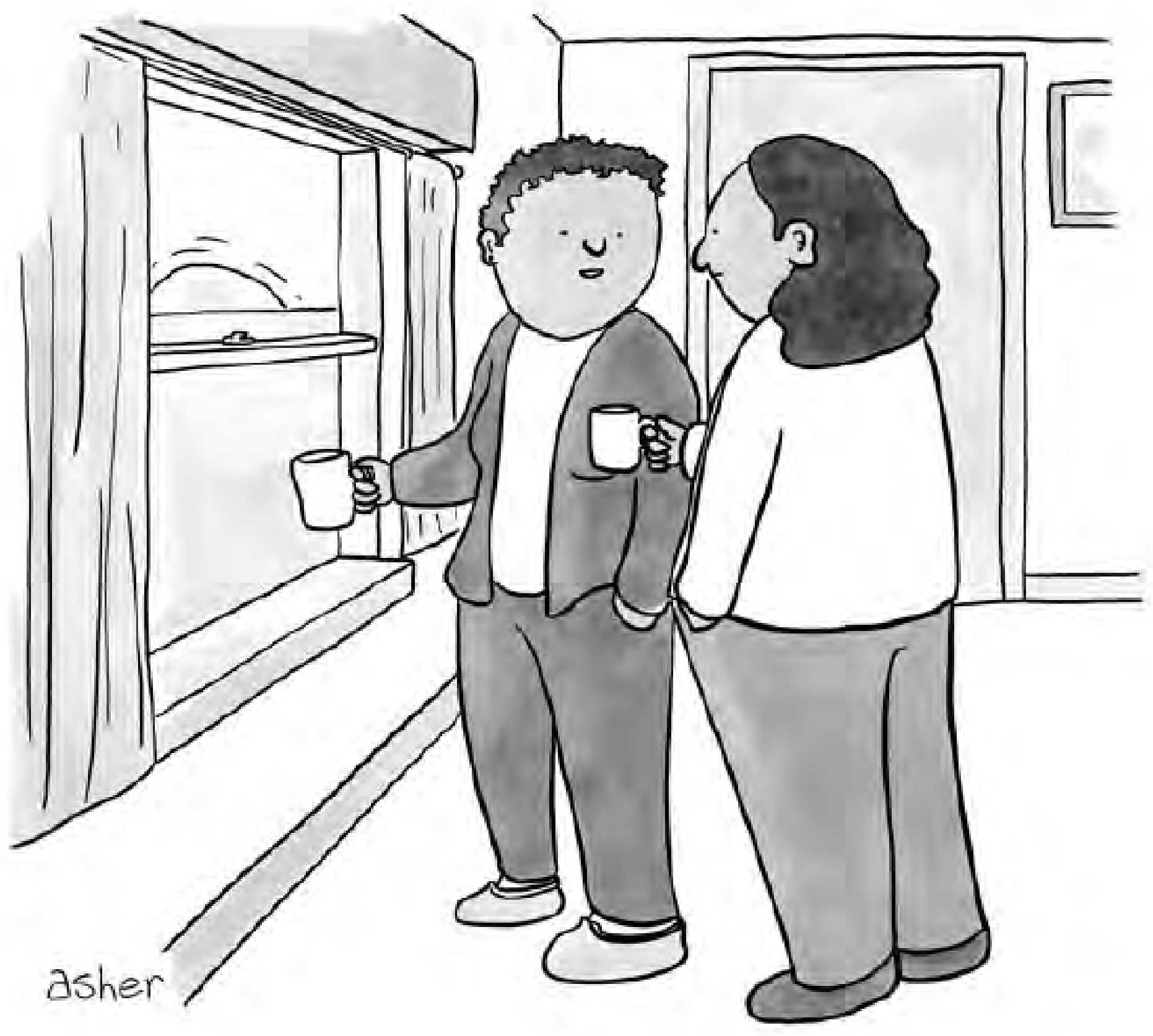
The New York–based comedian, actor, and *Late Show with Stephen Colbert* writer didn't begin cartooning seriously until 2020 when he, like all performers, was stuck at home during lockdown and unable to do live shows. His style evolved quickly. "The big unlock for me stylewise was when I landed on no eyebrows, little dot eyes, and a pendulous nose," he says. By the end of that year, he'd sold his first cartoon to *The New Yorker*. Now he's a regular contributor and the author of two books, *Well, This Is Me* and *Hi, It's Me Again*.

Perlman grew up in Wisconsin with an artist dad who passed on his love of the form: As a kid, Perlman spent hours at the library poring over *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Far Side* collections. One year for Halloween, he and his twin brother dressed as Akbar and Jeff from Matt Groening's *Life in Hell* comic strip. But he never considered cartooning as a career.

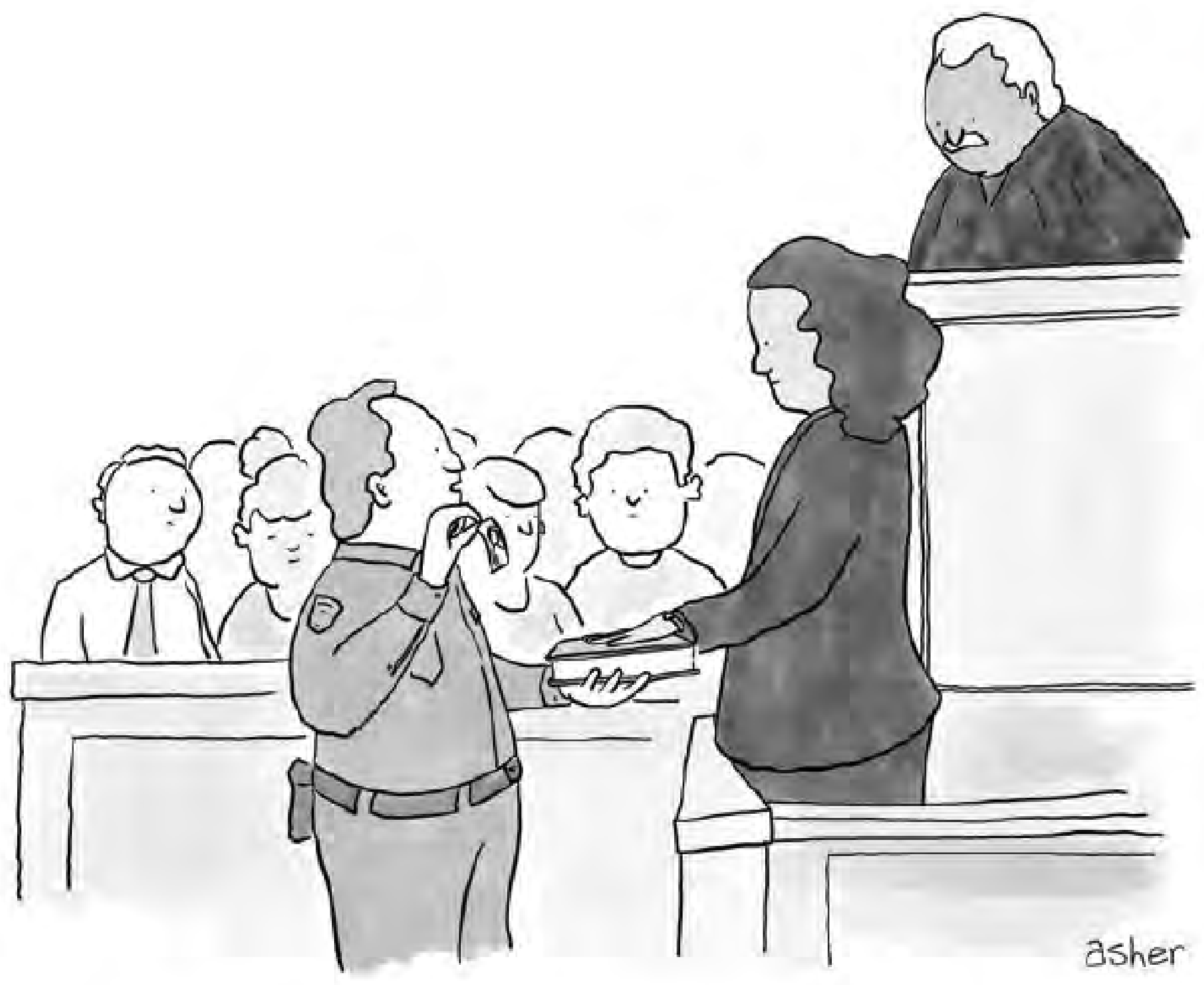
Now he creates four to 10 cartoons a day. Before heading to the *Late Show*, he runs through "morning pages," a stream-of-consciousness brainstorming practice he picked up from Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, circling ideas with potential and turning them into drawings. "I'm very obsessive, probably to a fault," he says. "But I guess sometimes it works out." —**ELLEN CARPENTER**



"I'll leave the details to you — I'm more of a big picture guy."



"I like waking up early so I can have the entire day to be absolutely, unbearably exhausted."



"Real quick, now that you're sworn in: who do you think is hotter, me or my ex-wife's new boyfriend?"

Gray Sorrenti

How do you capture an intimate moment with a pop star who has millions of eyes on her every move? Call in photographer **Gray Sorrenti**. One frame from "Woman on Top" (page 92) sticks with her, she says: Karol G against a pink curtain, light flooding in. (See it on page 2.) "I got this feeling in my stomach," Sorrenti says, "like when you get butterflies when you're just about to meet someone you like, or break up with someone. It's instinct." Sorrenti, who is based in New York, has recently worked on campaigns for Saint Laurent and Dior.

Jamilah Lemieux

Cultural critic **Jamilah Lemieux** has admired Nia Long since first seeing *Love Jones* in seventh grade. The film, set in Lemieux's hometown of Chicago, shaped her early ideas about adulthood, romance, and Black creative life. So when the chance came to talk to Long for the *Playboy* Interview (page 146), she didn't hesitate."I was obsessed!" she says. "I wanted to be just like Nina Mosley." Lemieux, based in L.A., writes for *The Cut*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Essence*, and is the author of the new book *Black. Single. Mother: Real Life Tales of Longing and Belonging*.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MINDY TUCKER; MARIO SORRENTI; ARIA ASKARI. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRONWEN WICKSTROM; JAMEY PRICE; COURTESY OF SEAN THOR CONROE; KANYA IWANA; COURTESY OF SEAN WILLIAMS.

Anika Jade Levy

Writer **Anika Jade Levy** always thought choreographer Lexee Smith was "a hot genius." Reporting "Lexee Smith, Unbound" (page 150) proved her right: Smith is an artist whose moves and physical vocabulary are all over pop culture—and she has a generous theory about it. "If my spirit wants to be seen through another vessel, that's still me existing," Smith told Levy. Based in New York, Levy, who profiled cult novelist Chris Kraus in our last issue, is the author of the novel *Flat Earth* and the editor of *Forever Magazine*.

Betina du Toit

"It's always a dance between the subject and me." For "Close Contact" (page 72), South African photographer **Betina du Toit**—based in New York and known for intimate, stripped-back imagery—trained her lens on model Julia Campbell-Gillies in a series of close-range images that isolate skin, faces, and bodies in quiet, sensory detail, successfully capturing what she calls "moments of sensuality, like snippets from a movie scene." Her recent clients include Issey Miyake, Dior, Estée Lauder, and *Harper's Bazaar.*

Chris Medland

When we wanted a state-of-the-sport take on Formula 1's booming global moment for "How F1 Won the World" (page 30), we knew who to call: **Chris Medland**. A longtime F1 broadcaster and journalist who reports from paddocks worldwide, Medland covers the series for F1 TV and has appeared as a commentator on Netflix's popular *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. This year he's especially excited about Cadillac joining the grid—"for both the growth in North America and wider interest," he says. Off the track, he calls Wokingham, England, home.

Sean Williams

British journalist **Sean Williams** reports on a nightmare scenario for travelers: being kidnapped and used as a political pawn. In "Vanished" (page 108), he takes readers inside the shadowy mechanics of hostage diplomacy—and what he found wasn't reassuring: "In a world becoming more volatile by the day, hostage diplomacy could soon be the new normal," he says. Williams is based in Buenos Aires and cohosts *The Underworld Podcast*, investigating global organized crime. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *Rolling Stone*.

Sean Thor Conroe

Sean Thor Conroe is the Japanese American author of *Fuccboi* (2022), a widely discussed fiction debut known for its distinctively slangy, speech-driven style. His essays have appeared in *The Paris Review* and *GQ*, but "Leah" (page 166) marks his first short story in a major magazine. "Fiction in *Playboy* has an aura around it. Something is back right with the world," he says of the genre's return to the magazine's pages, where David Foster Wallace and Jack Kerouac made the rhythms of speech literary. Conroe lives in the woods of upstate New York.

Kanya Iwana

Photographer and director **Kanya Iwana** approached her shoot with Miss March, Taylor Hale, for "New Reality" (page 116) as a collaboration. "Communication is key," she says. "I always have that instinct when I photograph women especially. I feel so maternal and want to be protective." Born and raised in Jakarta, Indonesia, Iwana now splits her time between New York and L.A., shooting editorial work for *Rolling Stone* and *Time* and collaborating on videos with artists like Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B.

PLAYBOY

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GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH PHOTOGRAPHER **BETINA DU TOIT**.

ANOMALY NECKLACE BY H. CROWNE, $222, HCROWNE.COM.

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LUAR

Playboy Advisor

BunnieXO has seen some things. Now the memoirist and podcaster is here to answer your toughest relationship questions.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUN LU

"In my experience, confidence in bed isn't about being extreme; it's about being present and honest."

BunnieXO has lived a million lives, from high-end escort to podcast host to stepmom of musician husband Jelly Roll's two children. Now with a new memoir, *Stripped Down: Unfiltered and Unapologetic* (Dey Street Books), she lays it all bare, continuing a career built on unflinching honesty and undeniable charm—which makes her the ideal woman to answer all your toughest questions on love, marriage, jealousy, and everything in between.

I've had to stop drinking over the last few months, and my life has improved tremendously. Except my love life. I have no idea how to meet people without bars or how to talk to women on a date without a buzz. How can I get back into the swing of dating now that I'm sober? *—Jeff K., Olympia, Washington*
I actually had to go through that whenever I got sober, and it's definitely a journey. You have to give yourself time, and you have to give yourself grace, and you have to relearn what you like sober, because what you like when you're drunk and what you like when you're sober are two different things. Go take an art class. Go dabble in something where you have to meet people and there's not alcohol—anything that's not in a bar setting. Go to church—go somewhere that you're able to mingle with other people but not be tempted to drink.

My girlfriend is way freakier in bed than me. I'm down for whatever in theory, but in practice, I'm nervous. How do I get on board? *—Liam N., San Diego*
In my experience, confidence in bed isn't about being extreme; it's about being present and honest. You don't have to match her intensity overnight. Ask what she loves, try what feels exciting to you, and say no when something doesn't. Enthusiasm is hotter than performance.

I just started dating a woman with two kids. How do I get them to like me? *—Brody M., Charleston, South Carolina*
My biggest thing with building my relationship with my bonus baby—don't use the word "step"—is let them come to you. Don't force your love on them. Don't force your opinions on them. Don't be too overbearing. Just be that soft, solid, strong point in their life, so that they are drawn to you. They'll naturally start gravitating towards you and feeling safe when they see that you're consistently the same person.

My guy friends are obsessed with body counts to the point where I'm self-conscious about the women I bring around them. Should it matter how many people the girls I date have slept with? *—Travis C., Fort Lauderdale, Florida*
Sounds like you need a new group of friends. Tell them to grow up.

I'm never going to impress a woman with my looks. I'm not that tall, I'm kind of balding, and I'm a little overweight. So what's my play if I can't win on looks? *—Connor S., St. Louis*
Make a woman laugh. Looks are not everything. I've never dated a man for their looks. I've always dated a man for how he made me feel. If a woman is only dating you for your looks, you need to find another woman, because looks fade, especially when you get older. If you're going to grow old with somebody, not everybody's going to be hot when they're old.

My girlfriend doesn't post relationships "for privacy reasons" but puts up thirst traps almost weekly. Should I worry? *—Nick D., Portland, Oregon*
When I kept relationships private, it was either to protect them or to keep options open, and those are very different motives. You're allowed to want clarity about which one it is.

Weirdly enough, my wife and I were having way more sex before we lost weight. Now that we're both on Ozempic, it's like we're not used to our new bodies. Is it a phase? *—Tom H., Arlington, Virginia*
When it comes to sex, slowing down after weight loss and Ozempic can be tricky. Big body changes mess with your head and hormones. Add a medication that blunts appetite and it's not shocking libido dips too. It's likely an adjustment period, not a permanent shift.

My wife recently made some major career moves, and she's getting a ton of praise for it—in addition to making way more money. I'm super proud of her, but I can't help but feel a little weird about not being the breadwinner anymore. Do I try to level up my career myself, or is it better to embrace my new role as a semi-kept man? *—Jace C., Milwaukee*
When I dated after leaving the industry, I had to unlearn the idea that income equals power equals worth. If your discomfort is about ego, that's yours to unpack. If it's about ambition, then grow because you want to, not because you feel replaced. A partnership isn't a scoreboard.

I've got a lot of baggage: some bad past relationships, a stint in jail, that sort of thing. My life is a lot smoother now, but it still feels like an important part of who I am. How soon do I tell people I date about my past? *—Chris P., Dallas*
I don't think you need to lay it all out on the first date. But definitely start dropping tidbits on the second date, because you also don't want to build a false pretense with somebody. If you know somebody has a hard boundary with certain things, you don't want to, one, waste each other's time, but, two, you also just want to be honest with who you are and what you've been through. If the person's right for you, they're going to love you and all of your darkness.

My girlfriend likes to wear low-cut tops and mini skirts. She says she does it more for herself and other women than for guys, but sometimes I feel like other men are judging me for how she looks. Should I care? *—Lucas Y., Pittsburgh*
When I dressed sexy, it was rarely about men and almost always about how I felt in my own skin. The only thing that mattered was whether my partner trusted me. Other men looking isn't betrayal; secrecy and disrespect are.

My girlfriend and I are both partiers...and we tend to flirt with others after a few drinks. It's a game, but she takes it much further. Should I be worried? *—Noah S., Mexico City*
This only works if the rules are crystal clear. Blurred boundaries always cause drama. If you're uneasy, it means the agreement isn't defined well enough yet. That's a conversation, not a crisis.

I'm divorced and newly dating. How do I come off as confident and interested on the apps and over text without seeming creepy? I'm terrified of being screenshotted and embarrassed online. *—John F., Scottsdale, Arizona*
Confidence is calm and specific, not sexual and not pushy. If you'd be OK seeing your message on a billboard, send it. If you wouldn't, rewrite it. Curiosity beats cleverness every time.

I've been in the adult industry for four years. I'm 25 and I know I could keep going, but I'm ready to pivot out. But I have no clue what I want to do. Any advice on finding my next thing? *—Emily P., Los Angeles*
The biggest mistake I see is people thinking they have no transferable skills, when in reality they've learned branding, boundaries, negotiation, reading people, stamina, and self-management at a level most corporate workers never do. You don't find the next path by thinking harder; you find it by trying small things until something clicks.

STYLIST: KRISTA ROSER. HAIR: MEME SHAHAN. MAKEUP: HAILEE CLARK. PRODUCTION: PERFECT PROJECTS. LOCATION: WSA.

Italy vs. USA at the 1984
Summer Olympics
in Los Angeles

SOCCER'S GREAT AMERICAN RESET

The men's pro sport can't find its footing here. Will the World Cup change that?

BY PABLO MAURER

France lifts the FIFA World Cup Trophy in 2018.

The Bare-Minimum Guide to the 2026 World Cup

If you haven't watched any soccer since Lionel Messi and Argentina won the World Cup in Qatar four years ago, count yourself in the majority. It's officially time to bone up.

❶

IT'S A NORTH AMERICAN TRIFECTA

For the first time ever, the World Cup is being hosted in three separate countries: the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with the U.S. hosting the majority of games. The action kicks off in Mexico City on June 11 and wraps up in New Jersey on July 19.

❷

MORE NATIONS THAN EVER ARE IN THE MIX

The tournament has expanded from 32 to 48 teams. FIFA, the governing body that runs the World Cup, says it's about giving smaller, developing nations access to the tournament and a potential financial windfall. In reality, the expansion centers on FIFA's desire to generate more advertising revenue. Shocker.

❸

THE U.S. TEAM ACTUALLY HAS A CHANCE

The U.S. national team that will participate in this tournament is arguably the most talented squad in this country's history, featuring players like Christian Pulisic and Weston McKennie, both of whom play at the top levels in Europe. They're coached by Mauricio Pochettino, a highly regarded coach with a European pedigree.

❹

JAPAN COULD BE THE DARK HORSE

No Asian team has ever advanced past the semifinals of the World Cup, but Japan may just break through. They are well-balanced, have been led by the same manager for eight years, and play attractive, forward-thinking soccer. They have some defensive weak spots, but the Samurai Blue seem poised to turn heads this year. What's more: They've consistently sported some of the most fashionable, wearable kits in World Cup history.

❺

YOU GET MORE BATHROOM BREAKS

Soccer is free-flowing, but this World Cup will be the first with mandatory "hydration breaks" in the middle of each half, effectively dividing matches into quarters. Ostensibly, FIFA is doing this out of concern for player safety. But it's probably doing this so that—for the very first time—it can take commercial breaks during the game. How American of them!

❻

THE GOATS MIGHT MATCH UP ONE LAST TIME

Argentina's Lionel Messi and Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo—two of the greatest players in the history of the sport—will be making their sixth and final appearances at a World Cup and could potentially meet in the quarterfinals. Many favor Argentina to repeat as champions.

DEEP IN THE NATIONAL SOCCER HALL OF FAME’s archives in Hillsborough, North Carolina, tucked in between old jerseys, balls, and mascot costumes, sits an old, weathered banker’s box labeled, simply, ANTI-SOCCER. Flip through its contents of old newspaper clippings and you’ll get a crash course in just how othered the sport of soccer has always been in America.

In the early 20th century, the game was viewed as too foreign, a product best consumed by the same immigrants many in the United States sought to shun. By the ’50s, that view had become more nuanced—the game was now for communists, not just foreigners. In the ’70s, after the Red Scare had cooled, soccer became, very simply, too gay, a sport for pansies. In the ’80s and ’90s, stakeholders tried everything to sell Americans on the sport: wider goals to encourage scoring, shoot-outs to decide tie games, and team names and uniforms that looked like a Mountain Dew–induced fever dream. No dice.

Now, with the World Cup coming back to the United States for the first time since 1994, the question on everyone’s lips is the same: Is this the moment that soccer finally makes it in America?

The thing is, people here are interested in the sport—just not games played on American soil. Once football matches from across the globe became readily available via satellite and cable television in the 2010s, the U.S. market ate that product up. Some 36 million Americans tuned in to watch the English Premier League in 2024, dwarfing the viewership of Major League Soccer (MLS), this country’s top domestic league. Many of those viewers perceive the American version of the game as a watered-down, inferior product lacking the authenticity and cultural elements present abroad.

“Our American soccer insecurity and inferiority complex is well documented and historic,” says Fox Sports commentator Alexi Lalas, who featured for the U.S. national team in two World Cups. “Soccer is still seen as an import, so the perception of our homegrown version often pales in comparison. This phenomenon is nothing new; we’ve seen it historically and to different degrees with music, wine, fashion, art, film, etc. The Euro snobbery is real and problematic for American soccer.”

As the 2026 World Cup approaches, the decision-makers at every level of the game in the United States are painting the tournament as a panacea for the irrelevance of their product. MLS commissioner Don Garber loves to refer to the World Cup as the “jet fuel” needed to supercharge his league. That enthusiasm is shared by sportsbooks: Legal sports betting on your phone is now live in roughly twice as many states as it was during Qatar 2022, turning what was about $2 billion in worldwide wagers into a figure likely far larger this summer.

By many accounts, MLS is already successful. It’s the longest-running true first-division soccer league the U.S. has ever seen, and most of its teams play in gleaming, nine-figure stadiums. Valuations of MLS franchises have skyrocketed over the years, with some approaching $1 billion, far more than many established European clubs, including Crystal Palace and AS Roma.

The bigger issue is that MLS is dwarfed in popularity by the NFL, NBA, and MLB. It remains a niche product, and fewer people watch it on television than ever, in no small part because MLS threw its product on Apple TV, behind a paywall. Abroad, it’s viewed as a “retirement league” for international superstars. Lionel Messi’s arrival in 2023 gave the league a short-term bump, but that’s faded.

It’s also expensive to be a fan. FIFA and leagues abroad have long viewed America as the world’s ATM, charging exorbitant prices for tickets to friendlies and tournaments held in the U.S. FIFA’s approach to this World Cup has taken that attitude to new heights, and tickets to matches are fetching eye-watering sums, pricing most fans out entirely.

But maybe the issue with American soccer’s muted presence in the country’s sporting landscape is simpler: Our men’s national team simply isn’t good enough. Every four years, the U.S. gets its chance to sell the general public on the beauty of soccer, and every four years, we’re reminded of the fact that we’re decades behind other smaller countries in terms of development.

“I think we can create an American version of the game that is successful and credible in honoring the global nature of the sport, while also taking pride in the Americanness of what we create,” says Lalas. “American soccer is our little thing, warts and all. Maybe this summer can help push that along.”

The U.S. has a chance to rewrite history this summer, to turn nonbelievers and haters into loyal fans. Doing so doesn’t require any input from decision-makers or marketing experts; it requires the most radical act of all: making a compelling run in the tournament. Just how impossible that feels is a pretty decent indicator of how far soccer still has to go in this country.

THIS PAGE: OSCAR ABOLAFIA/TPLP VIA GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE: JEWEL SAMAD/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES. OPENING PAGES: DISNEY GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT VIA GETTY IMAGES.

Pelé poses at the Xenon nightclub in New York City, circa 1979.

The Original Playboys of U.S. Soccer

Long before Lionel Messi touched down in Miami or David Beckham went Hollywood, **Pelé** tried to sell America on soccer with the **New York Cosmos**, the biggest—and wildest—soccer team in U.S. history.

It’s impossible to overstate just how huge a figure the Brazilian was when he arrived in 1975. The Cosmos, owned by Warner Communications, paid an unholy sum for him, and the club became an overnight sensation, selling out Giants Stadium and touring the world. They remain the only soccer superclub America has ever seen.

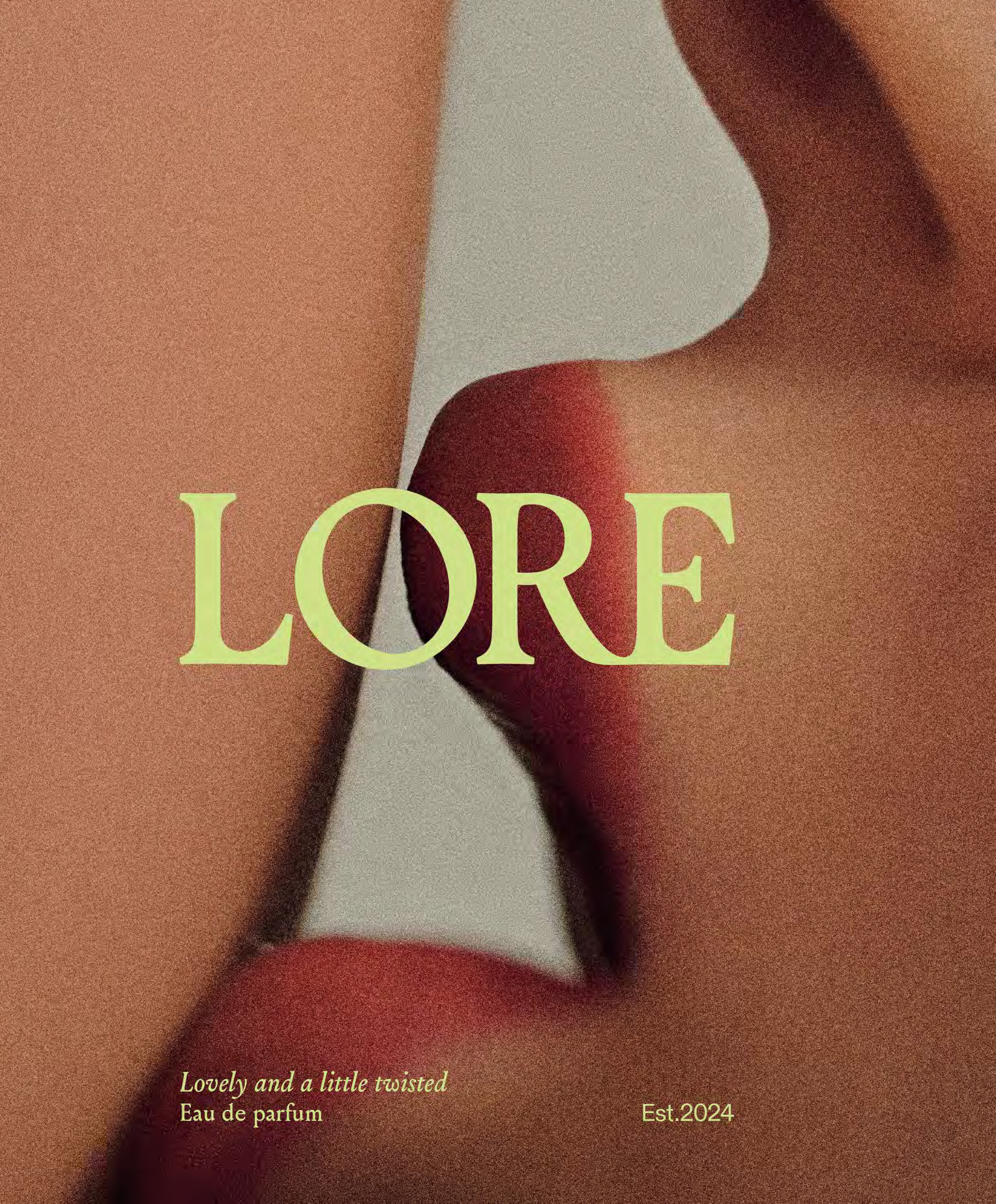
The Cosmos excelled on the field and partied like playboys off it. Their goalkeeper, a Harvard graduate named **Shep Messing**, got kicked off the team after doing a nude pictorial in a women’s magazine. By the time a host of other legends like Brazilian great **Carlos Alberto** and German midfielder **Franz Beckenbauer** joined up, players were regulars at **Studio 54** and often indulged in the partying and excess that accompanied it.

Steve Marshall remembers it all well. He was practically a teenager when he joined the Cosmos as the club’s traveling secretary. On a trip to Haiti in 1975, Pelé, the club’s golden boy, had gone missing. Marshall set out to find him.

“I walk into Pelé’s room and there he is in bed with a blonde woman and a dark-haired one, too,” Marshall said. “And come to find out, one of them was one of **Baby Doc Duvalier**’s girlfriends.”

Duvalier, a dictator who oversaw the torture and killing of thousands of Haitians during his regime, was not someone to be played with. Marshall lost his mind: “I’m like, ‘You have got to be shitting me, Pelé! You’re going to get us all fucking killed.’ I got out of that room so fast.”

Pelé departed in 1977, and the Cosmos folded in the years that followed, a casualty of America’s fading interest in soccer. Yet the legacy of the Cosmos persists: U.S. president Donald Trump has mentioned his memories of the club repeatedly, and a brand-new iteration of the Cosmos (albeit a minor league one) is set to start play in the United Soccer League in 2026.


LORE
Lovely and a little twisted
Eau de parfum
Est.2024

LORE

A NIGHT OUT WITH Rochelle Jordan

The hypnotic, dance-floor-ready R&B singer is stepping out of cult status and into a bigger spotlight. **BY MOISES MENDEZ II**

When rochelle jordan enters a room, it registers. All eyes are on the statuesque singer as she steps out of the elevator at Mr. Purple, a rooftop bar on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and saunters over to my table with her cloud of teased curls bouncing with each step. "Oh, *hello*," she coos as she removes her sunglasses and envelops me in a warm hug.

The martini-sipping patrons may not recognize Jordan, but they will soon. Her album *Through the Wall* landed on 2025 best-of lists for *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*, *Paste*, and *The Fader*, which ranked it No. 2, ahead of Bad Bunny and Bieber. She made her national television debut on *Good Morning America* in November, sharing her hypnotic blend of club-ready R&B and house music, and launched a headline tour across North America and Europe earlier this year. Tonight, after we talk, she'll play to a sold-out crowd at Bowery Ballroom.

For Jordan, this kind of success has been a long time coming. The Los Angeles–based British Canadian artist of Jamaican descent released her debut album, *1021*, in 2014 and then spent years caught up in a bad label and management deal that kept her in musical limbo. Jordan finally broke out in 2021 with her sophomore effort, *Play with the Changes*. She says *Through the Wall*—recorded with her longtime producer, KLSH (pronounced "clash")—feels like both a reintroduction and a confident step into the spotlight. "When the title came to me, I don't think I realized what that would manifest into," Jordan says as the sun sets behind us through the bar's floor-to-ceiling windows. "It meant pushing through some of the blocks that I had developed throughout my entire career—impostor syndrome, self-doubt, and fear."

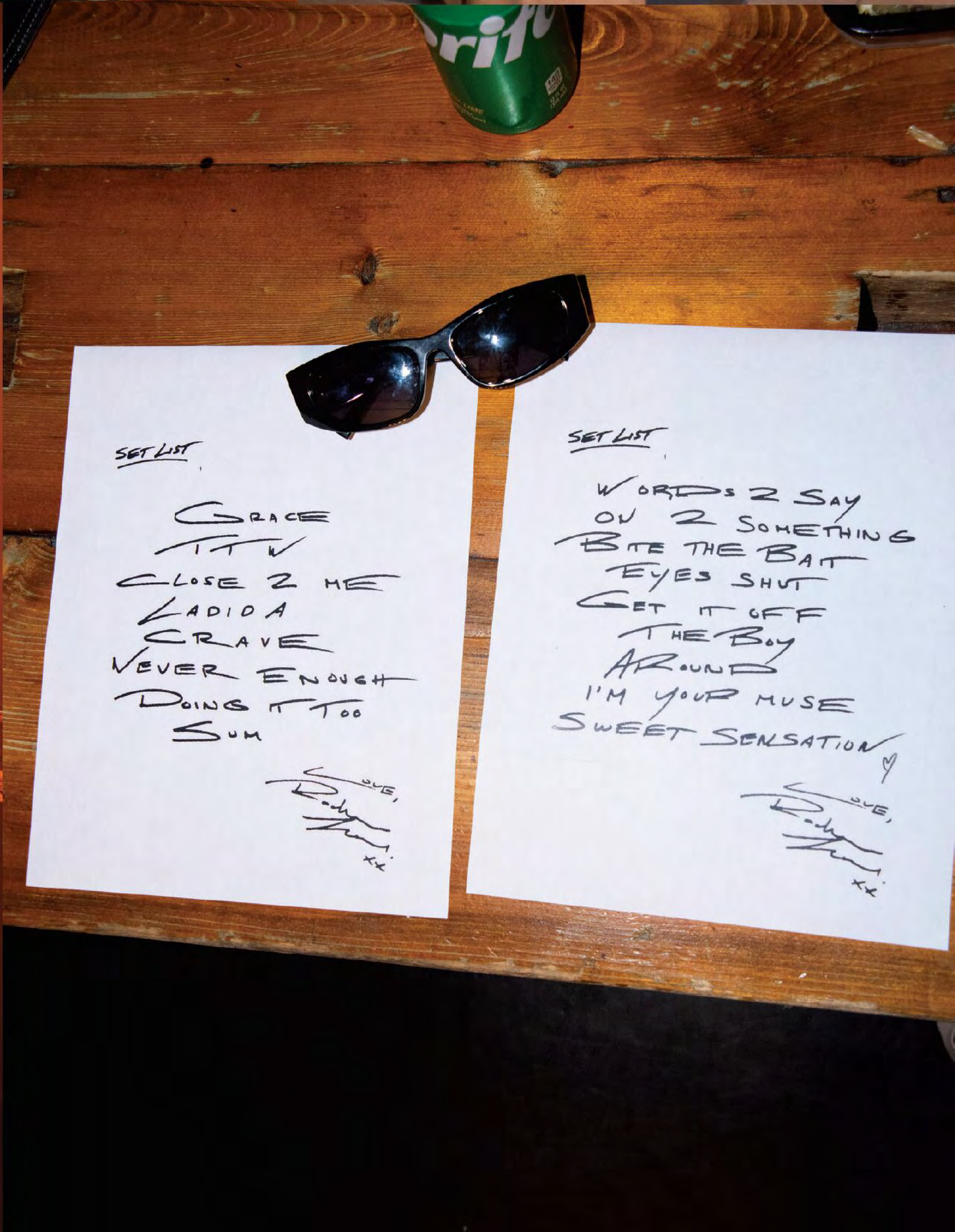
The album's title also hearkens back to her childhood in Toronto after moving from the U.K. Her brother, who is autistic, would listen to the same '90s cassette tapes of British house and drum and bass on repeat, and Jordan, who was often homebound due to having sickle cell anemia, would hear the music through the bedroom wall as she played with Barbie dolls, unconsciously soaking up the sounds that would one day inspire her.

Through the Wall is both a throwback and totally of the moment, packed with breathy, after-hours dance floor bangers that meld disco beats and deep house vibes with hypnotic synth melodies. "Suddenly, now everyone wants to do house, and everything has shifted," she says. "We are a profound part of this shift in culture."

So the question becomes: Will fame finally shift her way? And, maybe more importantly, does she want that? "Of course, I want Grammys. Of course, I want to work with legends and create a legacy that can't be stopped," she says. "But at the end of the day, I feel like success is already here. The fact that I've touched one person with my music and that they care so much—most artists don't get that. So for me to be here, I understand how much of a privilege it is, and I don't take it for granted."

She's right: Her fans adore her. Two hours later, she takes the stage at Bowery Ballroom in total darkness and begins singing "Grace," the ornate vocal intro to her new album, as the stage is illuminated,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **LUISA OPALESKY**



SET LIST

GRACE
TTW
CLOSE 2 ME
LADIDA
CRAVE
NEVER ENOUGH
DOING IT TOO
SUM

Love,
xx

SET LIST

WORDS 2 SAY
ON 2 SOMETHING
BITE THE BAIT
EYES SHUT
GET IT OFF
THE BOY
AROUND
I'M YOUR MUSE
SWEET SENSATION ♡

Love,
xx

revealing her dressed in a skin-tight tube dress and fur coat, her voluminous hair outlined with a halo of light. The body-to-body-packed crowd, which includes the singer Kelela, screams and pushes closer to the stage as she segues into the pulsating "Ladida."

Jordan slithers and slinks her way through a sultry, seductive set. She trades the fur for a glittery red and black jacket with sculpted shoulders, something Janet Jackson might have donned in her *Rhythm Nation* period. When she sings the four-on-the-floor "Sum," the audience joins in with the track's call-and-response without being prompted. "One more time," they chant, and a sly smile crosses Jordan's face before she continues singing.

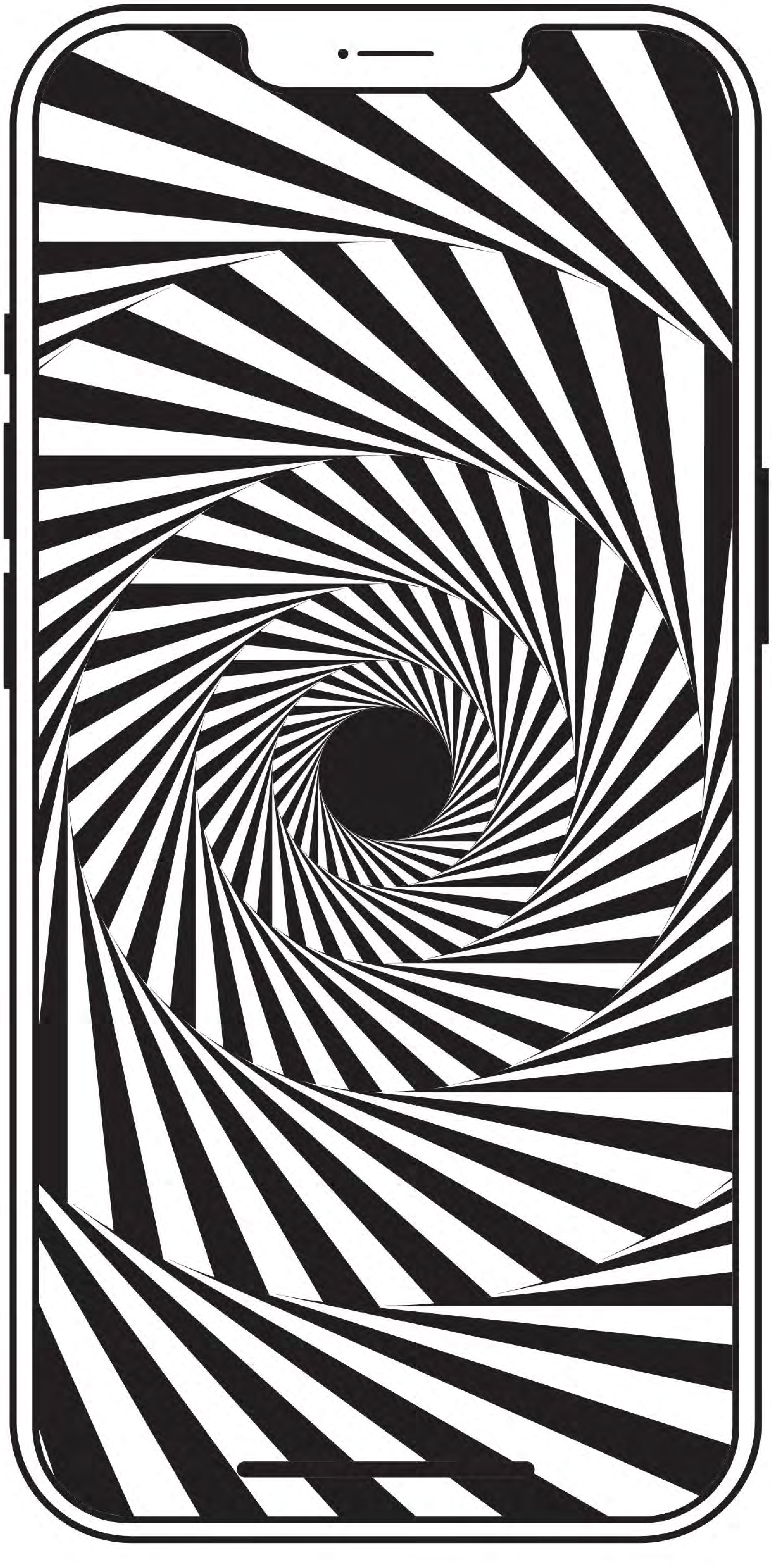
"Suddenly, now everyone wants to do house, and everything has shifted. We are a profound part of this shift in culture."

The confidence she talked about earlier is all over the room now. "I know what my purpose is," she told me before taking the stage, "and I'm going to do it until the casket drops. And it ain't dropping no time soon."

Your Attention, Please

Reed Duchscher built Night into the most influential talent agency on the internet. But can it mint another MrBeast?

By Jack Tien-Dana



PYTHAGORAS BELIEVED that geometry was the knowledge of the eternally existent. Michelangelo saw the angel in the marble and set it free. Homer begins *The Odyssey*: "Muse, sing in me." For as long as humans have been capable of creation, the role of the creator has been to recognize that there's beauty and progress, art and understanding, just waiting to be received.

"We had our eyes on **Hasbulla** very, very early," says Reed Duchscher, the founder and CEO of Night, a digital-creator management company in Santa Monica, California. "We saw what he could become."

Even if you haven't heard of Night, you've probably encountered its work. Surveys show that the average American spends two hours and 24 minutes per day on social media, more than twice the time the average parent of a grade-schooler spends with their child on leisure pursuits. And Night dominates social media. Its client roster, headlined by superstars like **Kai Cenat** and the **Kalogeras Sisters**, produces content that accrues 8 billion monthly views across YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, and Instagram—the rough equivalent of a view from every single person on the planet.

As the silent hand of the attention economy, Night shapes how people talk (Cenat is credited with popularizing the term *rizz*), how people eat (Night launched the snack brand Feastables in 2022 with **MrBeast**, a former client), and even how people vote. Ahead of the 2024 election, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders sat for interviews with comedian **Theo Von**, who hosts his show, *This Past Weekend*, on Night's podcast network; another Night client, left-wing political streamer **Hasan Piker** became a central figure in last fall's New York City mayoral race. In many ways, the story of Night is the story of today.

7.5 million followers on Instagram

The baby-faced Hasbulla, a 23-year-old with dwarfism, has parlayed friendships with some of the UFC's biggest fighters into a role as an unlikely manosphere mascot.

Hasbulla

ON AN UNCHARACTERISTICALLY OVERCAST Santa Monica afternoon, Duchscher, 36, is letting the muse sing. Born and raised in Rugby, North Dakota, Duchscher was a walk-on wide receiver for the North Dakota State University football team and got his start as an NFL agent, landing a job at Fritz Martin Management in 2013. Despite dreams of becoming the next Jerry Maguire, he soon grew disillusioned when he learned that, at a sports agency, sports always comes before agency.

"Early on, I brought [my clients] a lot of investment opportunities," remembers Duchscher, "and they didn't care. They didn't want to do commercials; they just wanted to play football. There was a little bit of a disconnect for me early on, because I didn't want to be a football agent who just does one thing. I wanted to work with people who want to build something substantial."

Nursing the sting of thwarted ambition, Duchscher, like millions of young men, found solace in watching YouTube. Almost immediately, he fell in love with Dude Perfect, five college friends from Texas whose viral basketball trick-shot videos midpointed the distance between the Harlem Globetrotters and *Jackass*.

20.1 million followers on Twitch

The most popular Twitch streamer, Cenat was charged with inciting a riot in 2023 when thousands of his fans descended upon a stream of his in New York's Union Square.

Kai Cenat

"If you found Dude Perfect in 2013 or 2014," says Duchscher, "once you watched one video, you couldn't stop until you watched 10 more."

After cold-pitching Dude Perfect about collaborating with his NFL clients, Duchscher realized that he didn't merely want to collaborate with Dude Perfect, he wanted to work for them. Although Dude Perfect is now a multimillion-dollar institution, they were just a five-man operation at the time, shooting, editing and promoting everything themselves. In 2015 Duchscher became Dude Perfect's brand manager, quickly helping to negotiate a deal with golf giant Callaway—netting himself a $30,000 commission in the process.

That same year, he launched Night (then called Night Media) from his bedroom, obsessively trying to reverse-engineer the next generation of perfect dudes.

25.4 million followers on YouTube

One of the first major *Grand Theft Auto* streamers on YouTube, Typical Gamer now competes on the professional *Fortnite* circuit.

Typical Gamer

"My mind just kept telling me that Dude Perfect wasn't going to be the last one to achieve this success," he says. "I would go to bed thinking about YouTube, and I would wake up thinking about YouTube."

Soon after setting up shop, Duchscher inked his first client, **Typical Gamer**, who still remains one of Night's marquee names. Although Duchscher initially "couldn't believe that people were watching kids play video games online," he noticed video game streamers were underserved by the existing talent agencies, much in the same way that Dude Perfect had no support system when he met them.

Old Hollywood tropes would pit Duchscher (tall, looks like he could still give a slot cornerback some trouble) and Typical Gamer (a typical gamer) as natural enemies, but by the time Duchscher left Dude Perfect in 2017, Night had built a strong stable of video game streamers. Then, in 2018, Duchscher signed MrBeast, who had started to attract attention for stunts such as counting to 100,000. Heading into COVID, signing MrBeast made Night successful. Coming out of COVID, representing MrBeast made Night undeniable.

"When I got started," Duchscher says, "[the big creators] were kids in the basement playing video games. Just as hip-hop replaced rock as the cultural center in the '90s, we always thought it was just a matter of time before the cool kids would take over the internet."

If Night's clients are the cool kids of the internet, Night likes to consider itself the cool kids of digital representation (or, as a former staffer quipped, "they think they're the hottest shit ever"). Befitting a company that, per Duchscher, "understands internet culture better than anyone in the world," Night's Santa Monica headquarters is unmistakably

37.6 million followers on TikTok

Thanks to their viral vlogging, the three curly-haired sisters (Sunday, Demitra, and Eliana) have reached the pinnacle of fame: a reality show on Tubi.

Kalogeras Sisters

FROM TOP: KELLY SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES FOR ACTIVISION; GILBERT FLORES/VARIETY; JEFF BOTTARI/ZUFFA LLC, AND 305PICS/GC IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: MICHAEL BUCKNER/VARIETY; NOUSHAD THEKKAYIL/NURPHOTO, AND JEFF BOTTARI/ZUFFA LLC VIA GETTY IMAGES. PREVIOUS PAGE: THEBESTSTOCKER/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (PHONE); DIMITRIS66/DIGITALVISION VECTORS VIA GETTY IMAGES (SPIRAL).

Gen Z. Zyn pucks rest atop standing desks. Memos often assume the form of memes, says one of Night’s social media managers, as he scrolls through a meme-filled office-wide Slack channel. Across the open-floor plan, guys wear streetwear and women wear white sneakers; in his office, Duchscher, his Heron Preston pants cropped above high-top Air Force 1s, wears both.

458 million followers on YouTube

After conquering content, what’s next? “If we lower the age to run for president,” the then 26-year-old tweeted in 2024, “I’ll jump in the race.”

MrBeast

“Night has always been an absolute pioneer in the creator space,” says Taylor Lorenz, the prominent tech journalist who runs the *User Mag* Substack. “They took it seriously way before a lot of companies did. Even with traditional management agencies, like CAA, WME, and UTA, trying to build out their digital departments, the new wave of young managers grew up watching YouTube, so Night is seen as the cool place to work.”

WHILE NIGHT’S SUCCESS has thus far been driven by its early embrace of influencers, the next decade hinges on its ability to become a nexus of influence unto itself. Since partnering with the Chernin Group in 2022 to launch the $100 million investment firm Night Capital, Night has expanded rapidly, launching Night Labs (a venture studio that helps creators build their own companies), Night Studios (a production company, which folded in 2024), and Night Advisory (a consulting firm that helps brands like NASCAR increase their online presence). Similarly, Night has acquired the Roost (a podcast network) and Experiential Supply Co. (an experiential marketing agency), and absorbed Bottle Rocket and LFM, two smaller talent management companies. Five years ago, Night had 10 clients; now it has over 250.

During its MrBeast-fueled ascendancy in the early 2020s, Night pursued only clients who had a long track record of success, according to the former staffer. But MrBeast’s departure in 2024 as well as changes to social media algorithms in general have forced Night to reinvent itself. Night was once powerful because of its strong client list; Night now has a strong client list because it’s powerful.

“The dominant social media platforms would rather have 100 creators with 1 million subscribers than one creator with 100 million subscribers,” says Taylor Kelly, Night’s chief strategy officer. “You don’t want a single person to represent too much of your platform because then you lose leverage and you’re beholden to them.”

As social media algorithms get more sophisticated, it’s become more difficult for creators to reach outside of their target audience.

“Creators aren’t really breaking through to the mainstream anymore,” Duchscher says. “They’re all in niche markets. I don’t know the biggest female clients or the biggest automotive channels on the internet because I don’t see that style of content ever on my For You page.”

In turn, Night maintains an internal document monitoring the status of thousands of creators. Rather than chase people at the peak, Kelly says, Night targets creators at an “inflection point.” With the stars having been dimmed, Night has learned the art of the moon shot.

“They’re really good at spotting talent and turning them into household names,” explains Lorenz. “So often, when a creator pops on my radar, I’ll see them start to rise and, boom, they’re signed by Night.”

Since “fandom is a function of time spent,” Kelly says, creators must simultaneously chase both connection and awareness. Long-form content, like YouTube videos or podcasts, should be full of easily clippable segments that can be packaged into punchy short-form TikToks, which then drive interest in the original long-form content. “If you’re a short-form-only creator you might reach a lot of people,” Kelly says, “but do they give a fuck about you?”

8.6 million followers on Instagram

According to Spotify, the Louisiana-born stand-up comedian’s *This Past Weekend* was the second-most listened-to podcast of 2025.

Theo Von

When Duchscher or Kelly or any of the dozens of people at Night talk about Night, it’s easy to get swept away in waves of jargony vagueness. In that regard—the ambient friendly bro-iness, the evasive chattiness—Night is the same as any high-level management or marketing outfit. This makes sense, considering that many of Night’s new hires are defectors from the major agencies and studios. They came to Night because it loves YouTubers, because it wants to create the future of culture.

“Night are winners,” says Lorenz, “because they’re fighters.”

Night doesn’t create content or have fans or write the checks. Instead, Night is something like a broker: It helps creators develop an audience, so that creators can connect with brands, so that brands can connect with the public. The promise of Night is a future where your time can be frictionlessly converted into someone else’s money.

So what does this future look like? An acceleration of the present, mostly. Already, the creator industry generates over $250 billion a year. By 2027 that number is projected to double to $528 billion, making creators bigger than the movie, television, music, and video game industries combined. After the failure of Night Studios, Duchscher realized that creators had outgrown the Hollywood machine.

3 million followers on Twitch

A highly influential left-wing political commentator, Piker has been called “the himbo gateway drug to leftist thought” by NPR.

Hasan Piker

“We had hoped the creators we represented would want to make things in Hollywood,” Duchscher says. “The majority of them didn’t care. They were like, ‘I don’t want to do something on Hulu and make a hundred grand for like three weeks of my time when I can make quadruple that just by making YouTube videos.’ ”

Whereas actors were once beholden to movie studios, these days a self-produced YouTube video carries just as much weight as a glossy studio production. If, as Duchscher says, “the future stars of every art form are going to come from the internet,” then creators are celebrities and all celebrities must be creators. TikTokers like Alex Warren and Addison Rae are the new pop stars; Jake Paul is one of the defining boxers of the 2020s because he was one of the defining YouTubers of the 2010s; Travis Kelce makes more money as a podcaster than he does as a tight end. Which brings us to the question: In the future, will the quality of art be solely measured by the quantities in which it is consumed?

“All you should care about,” says Duchscher, “is where people are spending their time.”

A Zombie Law Threatens the Right to Choose

The law that nearly killed *Playboy* is back—and now it's targeting abortion pills by mail.

BY BRITTNEY McNAMARA

A STRANGE THING HAPPENED after the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade* in 2022: Abortions increased. Though 41 states have some sort of ban in place, many women are able to receive a prescription for abortion medication via a telehealth visit. Now one in four abortions nationwide occurs with pills received in the mail.

But if Republican politicians have their way, those statistics won't hold for long. In 2023, the men who designed the Texas abortion ban, pastor and activist Mark Lee Dickson and former Texas solicitor general Jonathan F. Mitchell, tried to impose their morals on New Mexico by invoking 1873's Comstock Act, a Victorian-era "zombie law" banning obscenity—including anything "designed, adapted, or intended for producing abortion"—from transport by the U.S. Postal Service.

The New Mexico Supreme Court struck down their attempt, but the duo didn't see it as a failure. In fact, Mitchell said he was "thrilled" by the outcome. The case alerted conservatives across the country to Comstock's potential: a way to create a backdoor national abortion ban by restricting the mail.

Enforcing Comstock "is a very easy route to try to shut down abortion nationwide," says Joanne Rosen, a professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and co-director of the Center for Law and the Public's Health in Baltimore. "The legislation is already there.... You have to enforce a law that already exists."

LONG BEFORE THAT NEW MEXICO STANDOFF, the Comstock Act nearly took down the magazine you're holding.

Playboy's very first issue hit newsstands in December 1953, featuring an investigation into "gold diggers," Marilyn Monroe's bare breasts, and a letter from founder Hugh Hefner positioning the magazine as a "pleasure-primer styled to the masculine taste." Splashing into an intensely conservative post-war era, *Playboy* made waves when it hit newsstands, attracting the attention of the anti-obscenity crowd.

"We're talking about the height of Cold War domestic politics, where sexuality is seen through that lens in this intensely politicized moment," explains Whitney Strub, an associate professor of history at Rutgers University–Newark and author of *Obscenity Rules: Roth v. United States and the Long Struggle over Sexual Expression.* "The nuclear family is seen not just as a matter of sexual and social mores, but as a bedrock for the national project of Americanism."

In both 1955 and 1958, the U.S. Post Office leveraged the Comstock Act—which prohibited mailing "every obscene, lewd, lascivious, indecent, filthy or vile article, matter, thing, device, or substance"—to try to stop *Playboy* from being sent to homes across America. And it failed both times.

By the time this happened, the man for whom the Comstock Act is named was long dead, but his prudish postal rules had staying power. Anthony Comstock was an anti-vice crusader who, after the Civil War, teamed up with the YMCA.

"Anthony Comstock was a monomaniac," says Amy Sohn, a journalist and author of *The Man Who Hated Women: Sex, Censorship, and Civil Liberties in the Gilded Age*, a book about Comstock. "He was obsessed with purity and chastity."

Comstock used that singular focus, exploiting the rapid expansion of the federal government after the Civil War to

DON AZUMA / PLAYBOY ARCHIVES

infuse his strict religion into law—using the newly emerging federal power to bind sexuality to marital procreation.

Comstock claimed to have seized 150 tons of books and made 4,000 arrests between the time he was made a special agent of the U.S. Postal Service and his death in 1915. Over the course of the next decades, his anti-obscenity laws were eroded thanks to progressive attitudes and to a handful of court cases, including 1965's *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which eliminated Comstock's ban on mail-order birth control.

Still, the Comstock Act remained on the books.

WHILE THE EXPLICIT MISSION against obscenity eventually faded into the background, the Christian nationalism that drives these efforts never went away. The country endured an anti-porn crackdown that lasted from the 1955 hearings that blamed increasing "juvenile delinquency" on smut to the Meese Commission in the 1980s, a Reagan-era effort to prove that pornography caused violence and antisocial behavior. At the time, Hefner called this "sexual McCarthyism."

Comstock seemed forgotten until the Supreme Court overturned *Roe* and the legality of the abortion pill came into question. "The federal government isn't using Comstock to go after people with a painting of a sexy nude," says Amy Werbel, an art history professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City and author of *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock.* "The act is being selectively revived."

In an apparent attempt to squash the conversation, the Biden administration's Department of Justice issued a memo in 2022 declaring the Comstock Act essentially unenforceable. That hasn't stopped efforts like the one in New Mexico, though, nor has it fully eliminated the possibility that the Trump administration will use Comstock to get closer to a nationwide abortion ban. Trump has hired at least one Comstock-loving lawyer, Josh Craddock, to his administration, and Rosen says there are some justices on the court who are, at a minimum, "Comstock curious."

The same religious forces that drove Anthony Comstock's lifelong anti-vice crusade are again in fashion, according to Werbel. "That basic drive for Christian nationalism, and very specifically, a white Protestant Christian nationalism, that's what has never gone away," she says, noting that it was Comstock's fervent religion that led him to lump erotic materials and abortifacients together as obscenity.

We see this, Werbel says, in executive orders that seek to define gender, in the purging of women and trans people from powerful positions, and in efforts to control women's bodies like an 1870s anti-vice crusader.

"It isn't just women whose ability to control their fertility would be affected," says Rosen. "Male partners would also have real limits to their ability to control their desire to become or not to become parents."

The courts struck down those New Mexico laws, but a far bigger fight is coming. This past July, a Texas man filed a federal lawsuit against a California doctor, alleging he provided abortion pills to a former partner and violated the Comstock Act. His lawyer? Jonathan F. Mitchell. Experts expect the case to reach the Supreme Court—opening the door for Comstock to rise from the dead.

Honey Birdette
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Why Can’t We Be Friends?

In a new book, actor and director Andrew McCarthy turns a lens on the male friendship crisis—and his own.

BY JESSE WILL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ASH KINGSTON**

Andrew McCarthy's dilemma began three years ago, when the actor and director's then 21-year-old son, Sam, was sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor strumming his electric guitar, telling a story about a friend's romantic follies. McCarthy was at the kitchen table, laughing. Then Sam stopped strumming and looked up.

"You don't really have any friends, do you, Dad?"

"I have friends, Sam," McCarthy told his son. "I just don't see them, but I know they're there. That's enough." He's recounting the scene now, calling from Dublin where he's directing a stage production of *The Crucible*. "Sam considered me—probably knew I was full of shit—then graciously accepted my answer with a brief nod." Sam went off to see his girlfriend. McCarthy sat there, spinning.

It's a strange problem for a man like McCarthy to have. He emerged as a defining face of 1980s Hollywood, with star turns in *Pretty in Pink*, *Less than Zero*, and *St. Elmo's Fire* that cemented his status in the Brat Pack. He went on to become an award-winning travel writer and made the transition to director, with credits like *Orange Is the New Black*. A man with that résumé, you'd figure, had people.

His wife had delivered her own verdict a few months before Sam's, less gently: "Your life is getting smaller." McCarthy picked up the phone and started calling his oldest friends. Every one of them, for various legitimate reasons, canceled. "I didn't want the next time I saw my friend to be at his funeral," he says. So he said, "Fuck this," and got in the car.

What started as a trip to see a few of his oldest friends—Seve, Matthew, Eddie, among them—turned into a journey across 22 states and the book *Who Needs Friends: An Unscientific Examination of Male Friendship Across America* (Grand Central Publishing). McCarthy drove the whole thing in a succession of rental Chevy Malibus in various stages of repair. (It is in no way an endorsement of the Chevy Malibu, as it turns out.)

Along the way, he stopped at diners and coffee shops, eventually telling people he was writing a book about male friendship and seeing what happened. Nobody left. "I was ready to wrap every one of those conversations up," he says. "Every guy just kept talking. They would say, 'I have never talked about this before.' I could tell." Some of it was the stranger-on-a-plane dynamic, he figures. But mostly he thinks men are starving for exactly this conversation and almost never get the chance to have it.

McCarthy cites data showing that more than one in seven American men currently have no close friends and that male friendship is in steep decline. (Another stat that backs this up: This year, searches for "how to make friends as an adult" hit an all-time high on Google.)

McCarthy finds some surprising friendships on the road. In a diner in Ohio he spends a morning with two retired cops, Lew and Bobby, who'd been close for 50 years. They'd had jobs, McCarthy says, that required them to be hard-asses. Bobby tells McCarthy, with no apparent weight, that when one of them dies, the other "will just have to be put on ice" because he genuinely doesn't know how they'd go on. "I could feel the thing between them," McCarthy says. "But it was so alien to me. I have not experienced that ever in my life. I envy it."

Historically, McCarthy says, Lew and Bobby's friendship might not have been so striking. "By the time John Wayne took over, men became lone wolves," he says. "Carry your own water. Don't fucking talk about it, solve it. That's what a man is. To our detriment, I'd say. We've just gotten all kinked up and weird about it."

One of the book's more striking chapters finds McCarthy making repeated trips to the Baltimore apartment of Seve, his oldest friend, who'd been canceling visits and sounding increasingly unwell on the phone. What he finds is a man who can barely move from the sofa and an apartment buried under Amazon boxes. McCarthy spends the afternoon breaking down cardboard while Seve directs from the one cleared corner. It is not a Hollywood scene. There are no footballs being thrown.

On one stop, McCarthy drops in on Pulitzer Prize–winning author Lawrence Wright and his friend, the writer Stephen Harrigan, in Austin. Something Wright says sticks with him: "Friendship isn't something intense. It's normal."

McCarthy drove 10,000 miles to land there.

PRODUCTION: OUCH PRODUCTION. GROOMER: CAROL MORLEY.

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THE PLAYBOY GUIDE TO MEETING WOMEN IN 2026

Enjoy
Coca-Cola

A field guide to making a connection—without swiping first.

If you're a straight, single man with a sex drive, you probably want to meet women. Easier said than done, right? It's all been moved to the apps, which no longer seem to work and have rendered approaching someone in public a foreign, insurmountable task.

But despite the apps, despite the conflict between the genders, despite the general isolation and awkwardness that plagues social life, a fundamental reality remains true: Somewhere, deep down, men and women still have the urge to pair up. Even if just for one night.

So how do you do it? We asked women who know their way around a night out—including 17 *Playboy* Playmates and Bunnies—for their advice. Over the following pages, they'll tell you where to meet women, how to win them over, and, in case things don't go as planned, the best ways to handle rejection. Now go forth and date like your phone doesn't exist. —MAGDALENE TAYLOR

MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE

To meet a woman, one must be where women are. And women are everywhere! But there are a few places where it's easier to meet them. Here, some locations to try, ranked from simplest to most delicate approach.

By Magdalene Taylor

A Coffee Shop Where You've Become a Regular

We're not talking about lazily pretending to read Jane Austen while sipping a latte on a Saturday afternoon (though, honestly, that might kind of work); we're talking about creating familiarity through repetition and becoming an actual member of your community. Show up every morning when Cool Women with Things to Do breeze through repeatedly. Develop recognition over time. It's a lot easier to strike up a conversation with someone you've bumped into a few weeks in a row—if not with a hot single woman herself, then at least with someone who might be able to introduce you to one. Match.com's *Singles in America* study shows 18 percent of recent first dates were sparked after meeting through a friend, and 6 percent happened from chance meetings in places like coffee shops.[1] You ought to be maximizing both odds.

Guinness Bars, New and Old

Guinness is having a moment among hot young American women. They are actively seeking out bars where Guinness is on draft and a stout culture is cultivated. In New York, new bars whose headline feature is Guinness pours are opening by the month, and even established spots like Ray's (co-owned by Justin Theroux) promoted deals this winter where if you can manage to split the G, the next round was on the house. You don't need Theroux's spot—you just need to find an Irish pub where the bartender actually knows how to pour.

Trader Joe's

The grocery store chain has managed to cultivate an air of sexual tension among its offerings of gochujang peanut butter protein bars and lemon ricotta bean dips. Everyone's gotta eat. Does that mean everyone is going to be up for a conversation? Of course not. But it doesn't hurt to try to make eye contact with someone before politely stopping them in the next aisle. "I was in Trader Joe's after a daytime event, so I was a bit more dressed for the day than normal cozy clothes," says one former Playmate who asked to remain anonymous. "While I was looking in the bread section, a man popped out of nowhere with a big smile on his face and complimented my style. I said "thank you" and laughed. It didn't go further than that, but it could've been an easy segue into getting my number."

Bathhouses

Obviously, meeting new people in a bathhouse takes a little grace—you are, after all, in your bathing suits. But something about oscillating between cold plunges and dry saunas lowers the threshold of conversation. It's easy to find something to talk about. Be friendly, not flirty. Dip in the rooftop pool at Bathhouse Williamsburg on a cold night and rush over to the petite sauna lodge. You will spark up a conversation with whoever is in there, which often includes beautiful women.

Be Careful but...Yes, the Gym

If she is wearing headphones or earbuds, respect that and consider her off-limits. Don't interrupt her while she's in the middle of actually working out. But if she's lingering around the water fountain or hanging out in the lobby, you can go for a friendly introduction. Sometimes it works, as Playmate Taylor Gallo explains: "Someone waited until I was finished with my workout, introduced himself politely, and kept it short and respectful. It felt natural and low pressure, which made it memorable in a good way. The difference is always timing, awareness, and how the person handles the interaction if the interest isn't mutual."

Your Place of Employment

Between the '80s and early 2000s, a good 20 percent of heterosexual couples met as coworkers, according to research published in *PNAS*.[2] Workplace politics have changed a lot since then, and unless you're on the cast of *Vanderpump Rules*, the ethos of "Don't shit where you eat" has probably been thoroughly drilled into your head. For good reason, too: Nobody wants the place they're required to clock into each day to become awkward and uncomfortable. But that doesn't mean dating someone you met through work is entirely off the table. In the Match study, 12 percent of singles' most recent first dates were with someone they met at work[3]—the third most popular response, after dating apps and meeting through a friend.

OPPOSITE: CHRIS CRAYMER/TRUNK ARCHIVE. OPENING PAGES: JOSEPH SZABO/TRUNK ARCHIVE.

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[1] *Singles in America* study, Match.com and the Kinsey Institute (2025), https://www.singlesinamerica.com.

[2] Michael J. Rosenfeld, Reuben J. Thomas, and Sonia Hausen, "Disintermediating Your Friends: How Online Dating in the United States Displaces Other Ways of Meeting," *PNAS* 116, no. 36 (2019): https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908630116.

[3] *Singles in America*.

In Defense of the Pickup Artist

Lose the feather boa, the Burning Man goggles, and the pre-planned script. Keep the lost art of actually trying.

By Magdalene Taylor

BEFORE *INCELS*, *LOOKSMAXXING*, AND *BODY COUNT* BECAME HOUSEHOLD TERMS, there once was a type of guy known as a pickup artist. The year was 2005: YouTube had just launched, Martha Stewart was released from prison, and a writer named Neil Strauss published a book called *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*. In this book, Strauss spent two years embedded with a group of guys who belonged to the "seduction community." They called themselves pickup artists and shared their strategies for getting women they met out in the real world to eventually sleep with them. As that concept faded into obscurity, so did the pickup artist. But for a time, he played a role in our sexual culture. There was even a VH1 reality show about it.

The pickup artist liked women—that's the first thing to know. The pickup artist wanted to be around women, to talk to them, to flirt with them and make them laugh. And then there's the obvious: The pickup artist wanted all of this in an effort to have sex with women.

Many men today do not like women, if our social media feeds are any indication. They do not like women to the point that they also do not want to have sex with them. Do women want to have sex with men? I don't know. That's not really the point. That wasn't something the pickup artist worried much about. Whether a woman consciously wanted to have sex with a man was irrelevant. What mattered was that she could maybe be convinced.

This is not a popular line of thinking, and for good reason. "Convinced" is not an appropriate term to use within our adult consensual sexual lexicon. But at the same time it's like, I don't consciously want to order a side of fries with my dinner. I don't want to take a shot of tequila on a Tuesday night. I don't want to go to the gym tomorrow, either… But I could probably be convinced.

Attraction, by social psychologists' definitions, is typically described as an individual's positive evaluation of another person and the desire to initiate contact or establish physical intimacy with them. At the foundation of the pickup artist ethos is the belief that attraction can be cultivated. Those who practiced the art utilized two primary initial methods: direct, which essentially entails going up to a woman, telling her that you find her attractive and you'd like to speak with her, and the indirect, which can be anything from asking a woman to settle a debate to doing a magic trick. Now you've got her interest. Now you're building trust. You found a quarter behind her ear and she's starting to feel a bit more comfortable. Here the pickup artist would pivot to kino, or kinesthetic touch—those ineffable moments of spark in a look that lasts just a moment too long, the way you lean in to hear the words of someone you'd like to hear even more words from, the grazing of an arm as you reach for a drink.

Now the pickup artist would move into the seduction phase. You might hear the term *pickup artist* and think these are men who would buy a woman a single drink and expect to take her home, but that is a bit of a mischaracterization. The pickup artist community adhered to what was called "the seven-hour rule," meaning that they encouraged spending a minimum of seven hours with a woman in order to build an emotional and mental bond before initiating sex.

Now imagine a young man who listens to podcasters who tell him that women are repellent and that Nazi salutes are funny, or a young man who has been indoctrinated into thinking he will never find love because he's shorter than six feet tall, or even a young man whose intentions are good who has nevertheless done little socializing beyond a Discord server. Imagine him being capable of holding eye contact with a woman. Imagine him wanting to spend at least seven hours with one. Imagine him having at least enough baseline respect for women that he'd be interested in entertaining a conversation with them. Imagine him asking them, "Is this your card?" It's easy to imagine women wanting to sleep with him.

It is, really, that simple: In order to meet women—or even to "pick them up," if you want to use that term—you have to actually try. Now I'm not saying you should start donning an oversize faux fur hat and negging them, or delivering backhanded compliments in an effort to undercut their confidence. But I am saying that perhaps there are a few concepts to glean from the "wisdom" of pickup artists like Erik "Mystery" von Markovik and the words of Strauss. While some might argue that pickup artistry faded due to its misogynistic attitudes, the reality is that the manosphere it grew from is more misogynistic than ever. Trying to get laid has been traded for a culture of hustle and grift that views women as a waste of time. At the very least, the pickup artist didn't think so.

Seduction does require some push-and-pull. It requires the confidence in oneself to approach a woman in the first place, and the ability to hold a conversation to maintain her interest. A codified set of techniques is not going to present you with some foolproof method of hooking up, nor should it be viewed through such a rigid lens. The point, instead, is that charisma can be built, and that it ought to be viewed as a practice to be cultivated. You might fail at times, but you will have opportunities to try again. It is an art form, after all. And art takes practice.

JOSEPH SZABO/TRUNK ARCHIVE

HOW TO MEET A PLAYMATE

WE TALKED TO 17 OF THE MOST RECENT PLAYMATES AND BUNNIES—you know, some of the most beautiful women in the world—about being approached in real life: what works, what doesn't, and what's stood out. You might think women no longer want to be approached in person, but the reality is that only one Playmate surveyed said she doesn't like being hit on in person. **The vast majority like being approached.** Just under half reported that it is their preferred method of meeting men, with the rest reporting that they either like it or feel neutral.

Meanwhile, 77 percent think men are less likely to approach women in person than they were in the past—with phones the primary culprit. And just under half of Playmate and Bunny respondents are getting hit on in person on a daily basis. For the rest, at least weekly. They're used to guys trying to shoot their shot, so it's not weird for you to try it too. Here, three of them reveal the methods that worked.

There's been a few times where I've been hit on in person and it's been successful! The last time, the dude was dancing behind me at an after-party and it was really hot on the dance floor. He had a fan and used it to cool me down because he noticed I was sweating. I really appreciated the gesture so I grabbed the fan and used it on him. It was a simple but effective way of getting my attention. We later exchanged contact info.

—Cristal Torres

I was in a coffee shop and a gentleman came up and said, "I saw you from across the room and I couldn't take my eyes off of you. If you're not involved, I would absolutely love to meet you for a drink." He gave me his card, and I ended up taking him up on that offer. It didn't work out romantically but we are great friends to this day.

—anonymous Playmate

I was hit on successfully at a bar, surprisingly. He could tell I was overstimulated because the bar was over capacity so he made a joke of the situation. I could tell his intentions were pure and he was just trying to be nice. He waited to see if there was an opening to lead the conversation into something more flirty! That's the best way to do it.

—Emma Furr

How to Handle Rejection

What to do when you get turned down.

By Mary Kay Holmes

Rejection doesn't have to be a five-alarm fire. It's just feedback. How you handle it tells women everything we need to know about your nervous system, emotional range, and whether being close to you would feel deliciously safe or like a hostage situation. A man's ability to stay open, communicative, confident, and kind (even when disappointed) is far sexier than pretending he never cared. A "pass" or an ending is just information; it's what you do with it that matters.

"There's strong psychological evidence that avoidance strengthens fear, while gradual exposure weakens it," says Ryan C. Warner, Ph.D., a psychologist and public speaker. "The more men structure their lives around avoiding rejection, the more intimidating it becomes. Real-life interaction reverses that pattern. In my work, I've watched men change when they stop trying to impress and start trying to connect."

You ask her out at a bar. She says no. Will you finish your drink at the same pace? Will you linger or look toward the exit? We notice. Smile. Say "Totally fair. Have a great night." Don't disappear mid-sentence. Or you take a gorgeous woman on a date who makes you think you might actually want something more than casual. She declines a second location, parts ways with a hug, and later texts she "didn't feel a romantic connection." Take 24 hours before you respond. Let your nervous system land before your ego taps out a message. Then: "I had a really nice time, but I understand. If you ever want to reconnect, I'm around." Do not text again unless she reaches out.

That kind of composure is quietly magnetic and leaves the door open, not because you're waiting behind it, but because you didn't slam it in a panic. Confidence ages well, emotional intelligence is sexy, and the man who can take a no with grace is the man women remember.

But what of the two most dreaded forms of contemporary rejection, ghosting and the friend zone? Both can be approached with a similar ethos. Friendship after rejection is optional, not obligatory. You're allowed to walk away quietly without punishing her for honesty. Acknowledge, then decline or accept with intention. If she ghosts you, send one message after a few days. Do not demand closure, but reclaim your peace. Something simple like "Hey, I get the sense this fizzled, no hard feelings, take care of yourself." Then leave it.

It's easy to fall for the rhetoric that women are interested only in status and money. In reality, transparency and vulnerability are a man's modern currency. Rejection is a practice that helps you accumulate this. Rejection, much like failure, requires conditioning similar to strength training. When you reframe a closed door as a growth event rather than a commentary on your worth, it builds resilience and makes you incrementally more attractive in future interactions.

"Most men imagine rejection as a defining psychological event, when research shows people recover from social setbacks much faster than they predict," says Warner. "The fear tends to live in anticipation, not in the actual moment. In my clinical experience, what men are really afraid of isn't the woman saying no. It's what they think that no means about them."

You are indeed taking a risk putting yourself out there—that part is real. Getting rejected is frightening. Never mind the fact that it feels like there's always a distinct possibility that your rejection is going to be recorded and blasted all over TikTok. And maybe if you're really bad in your approach, that really could happen. But look: There are 169 million women in the U.S., and many of those, in fact, are dying to meet a guy out in the world. You just might have to encounter some women who aren't in order to find them.

How to Be Someone Who Women Like

Advice for winning them over.

By Emily Leibert

I LIKE MEN. No, I love men. Perhaps, if you've read the flurry of reports on the male loneliness epidemic or watched TikToks decrying the ills of bullheaded masculinity, you might have bought into the lie that all hope is lost for men. Instead, you should listen to me, as someone who chases the affection of men to my own detriment for a living. Not all is lost. This is the Great Opportunity to refine all that which constitutes being a Good Guy, a Real Man. I am offering you the keys to the kingdom of desire, and I cannot say that my motives are entirely unselfish, which is also how you know that I am telling you the truth.

PUT IN SOME EFFORT. Maybe you've seen guys in beanies getting roasted online for their little cups of matcha and growing collection of works by bell hooks. Performative males, as they're known, supposedly exploit their own sensitivity as a means to procuring sex. But here's the thing: I am a performative female. I read *Good Morning, Midnight* on the subway hoping that a potential suitor might notice my beaming curiosity and zest for modernist literature. I genuinely enjoy reading Jean Rhys. I also want to be noticed while doing it. In this vein, I argue it is crucial that you continue to perform for us, so long as your intentions are not exclusively to get laid and your cultural references have a dusting of feminine interest.

How else will I know that you are literate if not for the dog-eared copy of *The Paris Review* peeking out of your knapsack? You are merely magnifying the traits I am certain I will one day love, but I cannot fall in love with them to begin with if I don't know they're there. Plus, a performance of this kind will help develop a kinship between us: You now have a microscopic point of reference to the plucked and perfected one-woman show that is femininity. Good.

WATCH OLD MOVIES. Take it from novelist and girl-about-town Marlowe Granados, who believes that straight men should improve upon their cultural blind spots by studying the classics: *His Girl Friday*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Design for Living*, *Trouble in Paradise*. "When men can't deal with my personality, it's usually because they haven't watched enough earlier 20th-century film," she says. "All the women in those films are characters. Men need to be able to give it back and banter, and I think that's a skill that can be learned through Cary Grant, who's great at repartee, or Gregory Peck.

"These are the men they should be looking at to understand how to be debonair and suave," she adds. "Men these days are all really interested in dressing, but if you can dress like a gentleman without actually knowing how to be one, there's a dissonance there, as though you're wearing a costume."

TELL ME YOUR SECRETS. If being the provider is something that makes you feel whole and dutiful, well, surprise, I love being provided for. Unfortunately, I do have feminist scruples to abide by, so I will refrain from outright begging for your financial assistance or the password to your Coinbase wallet. I can provide for myself in the most dreary domestic sense, which means that what I need from you boils down to pleasure of the intellectual and sexual sort and good ol' companionship. So here is what I am asking, instead: If every man is his own universe, usher me into yours. This requires a conception of self that is intimate and studied. I don't want to know your favorite song—maybe it's "Poses" by Rufus Wainwright—I want to know why those chords keep you up at night, why they conjure visions of ex-lovers and stolen time and snow falling down. There is always an opening to introduce romanticism in the ordinary: the notes and rhythms and choreography that make a life. I am less interested in your ability to summit Mount Everest than I am your ability to plumb the depths of your own heart.

USE YOUR HANDS. But, short of that, any type of physical regimen, be it exercise or your sudden interest in woodworking, works for me. "I don't need them to be super fit by any means, but men do need to be working with their hands in some way, or else they will do war," says Stef Dag, a stand-up comedian and the host of the video dating series *Hot and Single*. "It's either sports or rock climbing, but I don't know… Sometimes I do think we need to put men into ROTC training or whatever."

As for style, Dag says you can wear whatever you want, so long as it's not workwear: "Unless you're out there working in those streets every day doing construction, why are you, a creative director that lives in Greenpoint, wearing Carhartt?"

But cosplay is sometimes OK. "You really can't go wrong with a hot biker jacket," says author and journalist Tea Hacic-Vlahovic. "It's OK if you don't know how to ride a motorcycle."

HAVE AN OBSESSION. Also: I do not want your ambivalence. I am uninterested in men who perform clout-derived coolness or take up predictable hobbies like video games or pickleball. If you must lust after something that is not me, make it the center of your world. I am unimpressed by run clubs, but if you do engage, educate me on its utility for you. Is it the rhythm of thumping feet against hot, black city pavement? Is it the sweat that burdens the bridge of your nose when all is cold and tired and gray? All I ask is that you bring the same level of passion for the niche Instagram account you run chronicling architectural design trends of the '80s to our courtship.

I say all of this not as a strict directive, but with tenderness and longing. Consider this a plea, if you will, for your attention and love, with great hope that you will put as much effort into discovering me, as I, you. Go on a charm offensive. Study poetry. Brush up on the state of reproductive rights. Respond to the nudes I send you with "I am the luckiest man alive" (you are). Write love songs. Proudly display your tube of Rogaine on the bathroom sink. Deliver handwritten notes. Whatever you do, do it with grandeur, and commit. It is all much rarer than you could ever know.

THIS PAGE: CHRIS CRAYMER/TRUNK ARCHIVE. OPPOSITE: ONDREA BARBE/TRUNK ARCHIVE.

The Misadventures of Miss January

Carlotta Kohl traveled to Costa Rica to make *Playboy* history—but ended up lost in the jungle with much fewer clothes than planned.

BY MAGDALENE TAYLOR   PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLOTTA KOHL

Miss
January

MISS JANUARY

CARLOTTA KOHL

MISS JANUARY

CARLOTTA KOHL

CARLOTTA KOHL was already set to make history when she flew to Costa Rica to become the first ever Playmate to photograph herself for *Playboy*. Little did she know she'd also be the first Playmate to be led by a mysterious sherpa dog to a waterfall, be robbed of her phone and bikinis (not by the dog), scrape her entire body on the beach, and contract what she suspects was scarlet fever all in the same trip. Oh, and to top it off, her friend accidentally sat in a scorpion's nest while they were there.

Fortunately, in addition to her work as both a photographer and a model, Kohl has a bit of experience in these sorts of outdoor antics, having camped in the snow on Mount Shasta in California and having previously zip-lined naked on one of photographer Ryan McGinley's iconic road trip projects. For her, there are two types of fun: the kind you experience immediately and the kind you have only when accomplishing something difficult. This shoot, she recalls fondly, falls into the latter.

"I could have made it so much easier on myself," she says. "I could have shot in a studio or whatever, but I thought, 'This will be fun.'"

Just getting to Costa Rica was a lot; Kohl flew from Switzerland to the States and then on to San Juan, Puerto Rico, before hopping a puddle jumper to Santa Teresa, Costa Rica. "I had my friend come, but I kind of misled her," she says. "I told her she could surf and help me out from time to time—that never happened. She never surfed." On their first day, Kohl's phone and a bag of bikinis were stolen from their rental car. Against the advice of police, she and her friend used the Find My app to track down her phone. For reasons she still doesn't understand, she found it nestled in a tree by a river. "I never did find the bag of bikinis," she says. "So that's why a lot of the shoot was more nude than stylized."

The next day, they were scouting a waterfall in the jungle, vaguely lost, when a dog appeared. "It ended up saving us from a herd of cows and a bull at the front coming toward us, and then leading us to the waterfall," she recalls. "This dog does not leave our side. It keeps thinking that we're drowning, so it comes into the water to save us. But in the meantime, it's also putting its whole paws and weight on us and drowning us."

This is but a fraction of her anecdotes from the trip, many of the rest of which end

in scrapes, bruises, and bug bites. "The best one is that I originally traveled in a pair of sweatpants, but by the end, I couldn't find them," she says. "They were my only long pants, so I landed back in New York in the winter in shorts."

Kohl is a natural fit for *Playboy*'s first Playmate-meets-photographer. As an artist, her work often deals with female sexuality and identity. She graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York City with a degree in photography, and over the years, her images have appeared in publications such as *L'Officiel Paris*, *L'Officiel Hommes*, and *Numéro Tokyo* and in galleries around the world. Her photography depicts realism but through a dreamlike lens, sensual and saturated. As a model, she's worked with brands ranging from Gap to Max Mara and even graced the cover of St. Vincent's album *Masseduction* (well, her butt did). She came to both of her roles naturally: Her father is a photographer, and her mother is a model. They're also German, a fact she believes has lent her a lifelong comfortability with nudity. "I never grew up with that shame," she says. "I think it gave me a good view on sexuality and how the body can be beautiful, how there's power in nudity."

That foundation helped prepare her for her *Playboy* shoot. But even without the numerous mishaps, creating a Playmate pictorial independently is no small task. *How do I look good but also take an interesting shot that resonates?* she asked herself. *I want it to look like the woman is in control and in her power.* Helmut Newton and Bunny Yeager were inspirations for the shoot. "Now I understand why Bunny Yeager had mirrors," she jokes. "I couldn't be like, 'OK, let me see how this looks from over here.' When I'm taking a photo and I'm looking through the lens, I am making all these micro decisions and I can have more freedom. There's a fine line between taking an interesting photo and also making sure that you look good." Even with all this, Kohl was able to capture herself as artist and muse all in one.

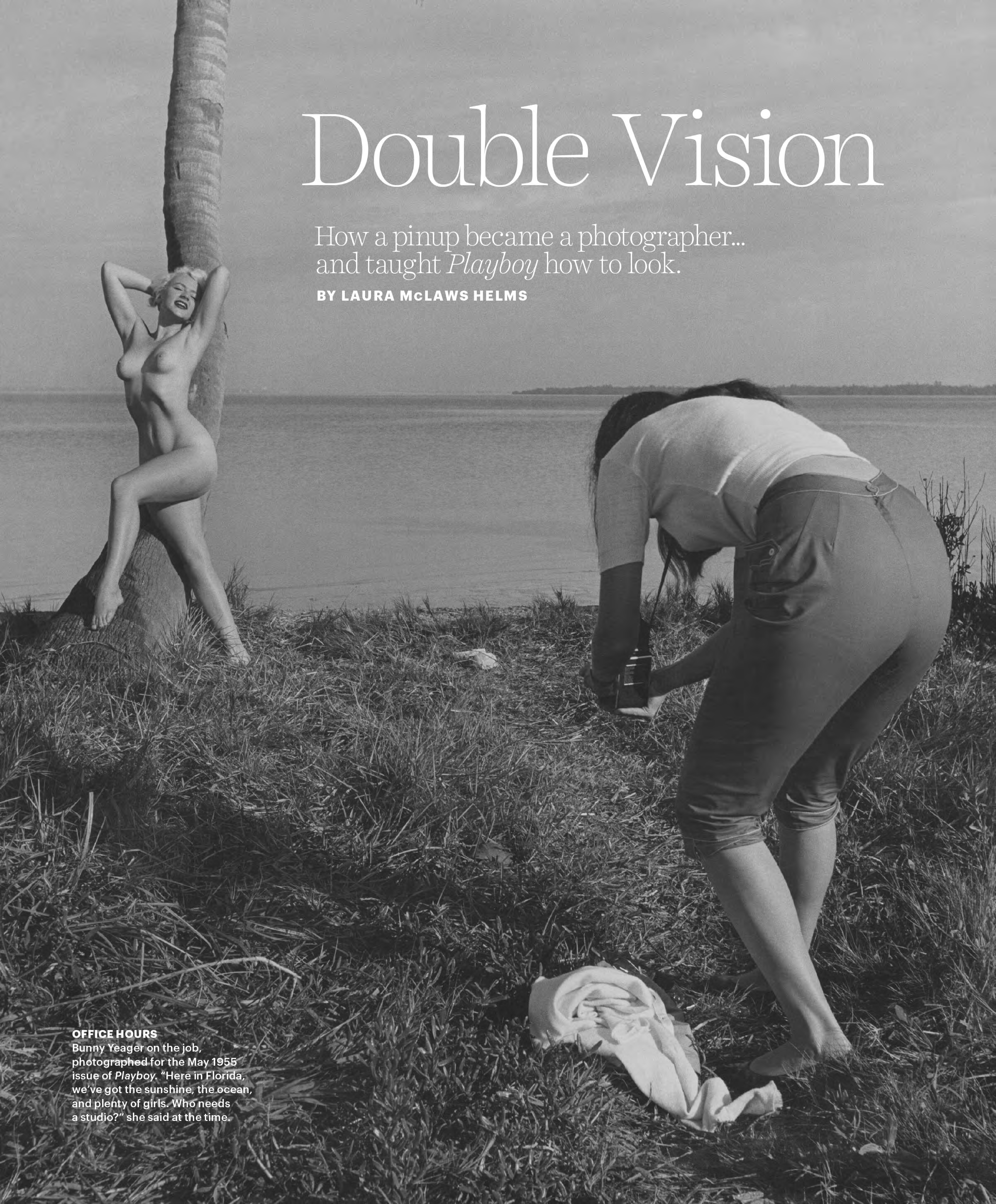
"I had to let go of some power, too, because it's like, I can't fully control everything," she says. "Most beautiful things come out of things kind of going wrong, and you pivot and you make all these decisions you're not even realizing, but it just feels right in the moment."

Looking back, she's grateful for all the chaos she faced on the shoot. "Now I think that was one of the best things I did in 2025. I feel proud of myself as a human. I kept getting knocked down—literally knocked down," she laughs. "And I still asked, 'OK, what's next?'"

Double Vision

How a pinup became a photographer… and taught *Playboy* how to look.

BY LAURA McLAWS HELMS



OFFICE HOURS
Bunny Yeager on the job, photographed for the May 1955 issue of *Playboy*. "Here in Florida, we've got the sunshine, the ocean, and plenty of girls. Who needs a studio?" she said at the time.

AT THE OUTSET OF THE 1950s, images of Bunny Yeager ran in newspapers from Miami to New York, making her the curvaceous, unmistakably at-ease pinup of the moment. Her career was already soaring when she made the decision that would redirect it entirely: She picked up a camera.

The move was practical as much as it was aesthetic. Watching male photographers build careers by photographing bodies like hers, Yeager began to question the arrangement. "I figured that if I knew how to pose and how to set up a picture," she told *Playboy* in 1955, "then all the guy at the back of the camera was doing was clicking the shutter. That didn't seem hard and he was making all the money." So Yeager learned to do it all: light, direct, shoot, edit, sell, and even sew the bikinis. If men could get paid just for clicking, she'd own the whole thing.

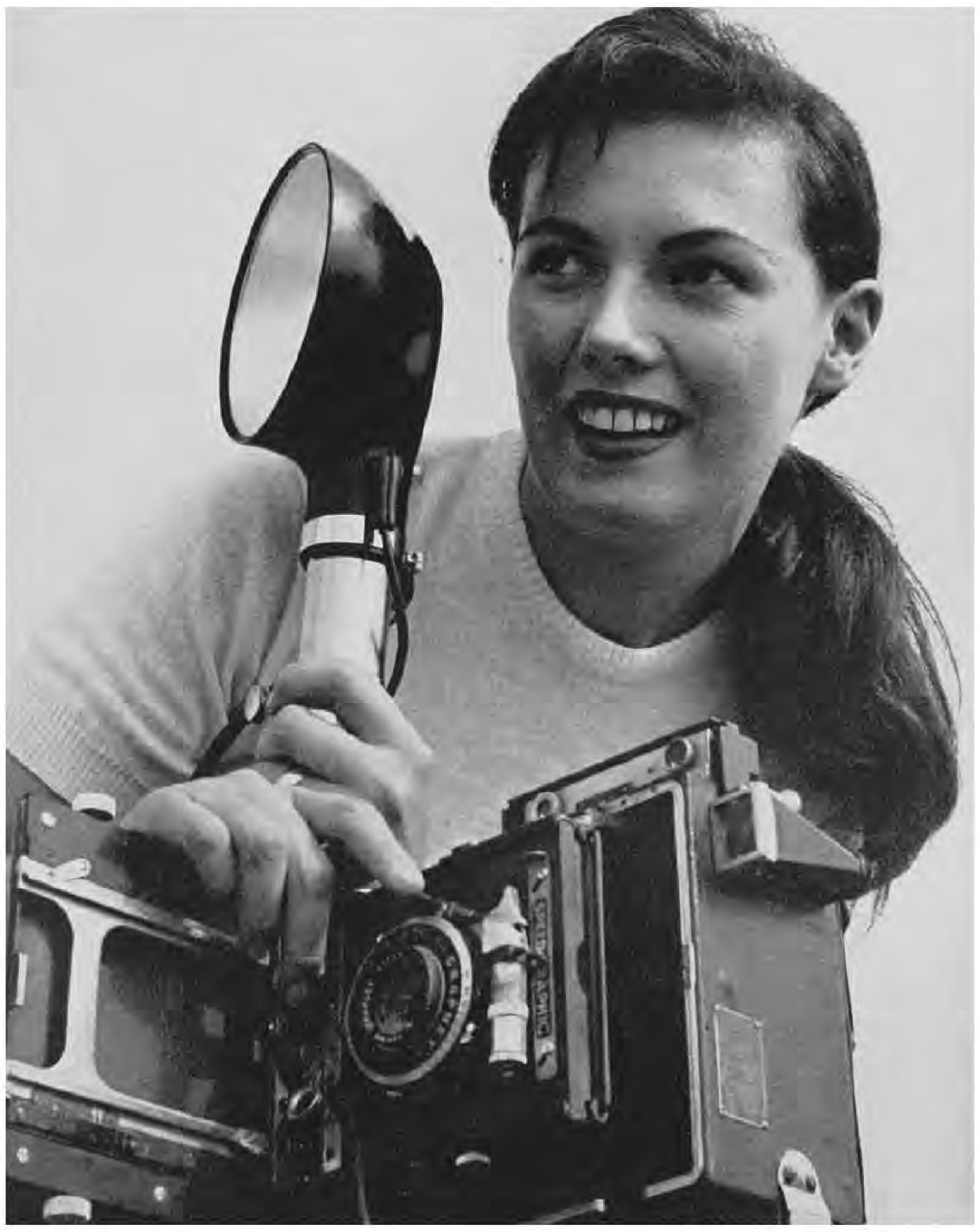
Yeager preferred working outdoors, shooting on beaches in natural light rather than studio setups. The result was a kind of sexuality that felt easy and uncalculated, unconstrained by social mores.

That sensibility caught Hugh Hefner's attention. *Playboy* was still new in 1954, "picking up" photo shoots that were already in the can from freelancers. But the images Yeager sent in of Bettie Page were so striking that Hefner commissioned something more: a centerfold collaboration. The result was Page, nude and winking in a Santa hat, playfully covering herself with a Christmas ornament. It ran in January 1955 and became one of the magazine's most recognizable images.

Her influence extended beyond the pages. In the late '50s and '60s, she wrote more than a dozen books, including *How I Photograph Nudes*, and became the star of a series of semi-fictionalized films that depicted her at work behind the camera.

The culture moved on. Her playful, sun-drenched pinups fell out of favor in the 1970s, but a rockabilly revival in the '90s brought them back, along with a renewed fascination with Bettie Page. Yeager died in 2014, but interest hasn't waned: In the past few years, Yeager has been the subject of a feature-length documentary, and her photos have been hung on the walls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her reach even extends to this issue's Miss January, Carlotta Kohl, who had Bunny's images all over her mood boards before she turned the camera on herself in Costa Rica (page 52).

One male photographer of the '50s captured what set her apart: "Bashful models will disrobe for only one of two reasons—for love or Bunny."



BUNNY'S MUSE
Bettie Page (below), Yeager's most celebrated subject (and our January 1955 Playmate). Page and Yeager met in Miami in 1954 and shot together prolifically, more than 1,000 images in all.

THE CAMERA AND THE COAST
Yeager (top) and her Speed Graphic camera. *Above:* Yeager walks the Miami shoreline with a model. She would schedule shoots before the locals were up, the beach a set she never had to rent.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MIKE SHEA/PLAYBOY ARCHIVES (2); BUNNY YEAGER/PLAYBOY ARCHIVES. OPPOSITE: MIKE SHEA/PLAYBOY ARCHIVES.

Swingers at Sea

One intrepid reporter.
Six nights in a floating fantasyland.
One thousand couples slipping into a sex
life few back home will ever know about.

BY CAMILLE SOJIT PEJCHA

"I want you to imagine the sexual energy inside you as a hot red light," says Kate Shelor, a hypnotherapist and OnlyFans star who—other than me—is the only person in the room not wearing a blindfold. She stands in the center of a circular stage like the leader of a megachurch, her beatific blond face tilted toward the 50 or so daybeds arranged in a perfect ring around her.

On those daybeds, couples kneel or straddle each other, naked except for the blindfolds covering their eyes.

"Remember," Shelor calls out, her voice syrupy and practiced, "the difference between simple touch and intimacy is attention. Feel your partner. Talk to them with your hands. Tell your partner what you need, want, and crave."

To my left, the only gay couple in the room is already sucking each other off, heads bobbing with impressive enthusiasm. To my right, a girl in a baseball cap appears to be dozing off while a guy with tribal tattoos dutifully goes down on her.

In the background, shamanic beats swell, and Shelor's voice rises to match. "It's getting more powerful now," she says. "You feel your body responding. Tune in to the sounds around you as they grow."

As if on cue, a moan ruptures the silence. Across the auditorium, bodies rise and fall, blindfolded couples riding each other's faces and cocks in eerie synchrony.

"Go slow. Make it last. Stay with me," Shelor says, as whispers turn to whimpers and then, finally, a chorus of deep, open-mouthed *O*'s.

I look up from my reporter's notebook, past the couples and at the ceiling, where a shimmering disco ball—formerly stationary—is swinging back and forth like a hypnotist's pendulum. For a moment, I can't tell whether the ship is rolling beneath us, or whether it's the synchronized rhythm of 50-odd blindfolded swingers making the entire vessel move.

Either way, it seems like my cue to exit, so I pocket my notebook and slip quietly out of the playroom onto deck 13. The sun, unimaginably bright, shocks my eyes as I look out at my surroundings: a clothing-optional pool deck the size of a small soccer stadium, occupied by hundreds and hundreds of nude Americans on the wildest vacation of their lives.

For months, my phone has been pitching me adults-only vacations, probably because it overhears me talking about reporting on sex parties and then about needing a vacation from reporting on sex parties. I'd been clicking away from these ads, mildly bemused, until one day, in late October, I woke up to a text from *Playboy*: Did I want to go on a swingers' cruise called Temptation, and would these dates work? I've never said yes to anything so fast.

Billed as "a playground for grown-ups," Temptation offers a city on the water: a fully chartered 13-story cruise ship where guests can enjoy everything from air-conditioned casinos and breakfast buffets to fuck machines. The goal? Create an all-inclusive fantasy for American adults, spiriting them away from their worries and toward international waters, where they'll be free to indulge in a level of hedonistic pleasure-seeking absent in everyday life. One friend of mine—who I learn is a swinger only when I tell him about this story—aptly describes such experiences as a "Chuck E. Cheese for sex." Mario Cruz, Temptation's programming director, prefers "spring break for adults."

Over his six years overseeing Temptation's cruises, Cruz has played host to NFL players, lawyers, the presidents of major universities, and, if the rumors are to be believed, more than a few celebrities. "In their private time, they're just humans," he explains. "Everyone has a private life; they fantasize about these things. We just give them a space to turn that fantasy into reality."

Before embarkation day, I'd expected being one of the only solo women on board would grant me the status of a minor celebrity. "People are going to be lining up to make you their unicorn," my friends assured, predicting a profusion of threesome proposals. But at the Port of Miami, where I wait patiently in line to board the *Norwegian Jewel*, this is not the case. Instead, I spend the first hour and a half of my journey inching my luggage forward, surrounded by muscle-bound men with religious tattoos, Miami housewives with fake lashes and perfectly plumped lips, and tanned blondes lugging beach totes adorned with cheesy phrases like "Sea You Later." Everyone is so grumpy that, for a minute, I even question if I'm in the right line.

I needn't have worried. "When they're waiting to board, they're still in the outside world," Cruz later tells me, describing the peculiar transformation that happens when people cross the ship's threshold. The sea, I realize, is a liminal space, where the boundaries and norms of everyday life no longer apply. This is a metaphor, but also literally true: When at sea, the pool deck and balconies are clothing-optional, but everyone has to button up when the boat docks.

Now that we're on board, everyone seems 10 times more outgoing, happy, and naked than they were before. And by the time I make my way to the Sapphire pool deck, I get the sense that I'm late to the party—one populated by 500 couples slathered in sunscreen and

buoyed by the Black Eyed Peas blasting through the speakers. I haven't been on a ship since a fifth-grade field trip, and the *Norwegian Jewel*, with its 16 restaurants and numerous swimming pools, is more than I was bargaining for. Temptation charters the whole ship, hiring not only the *Norwegian*'s team but a group of sexologists, entertainers, and DJs to offer on-site activities ranging from workshops on anal pleasure to massage for sciatica.

In the coming days, there will be pamper parties and acupuncture, beer pong and belly dancing classes, body shots and sensual fitness sessions, and, in one case, a meet and greet that devolves into couples miming various sex positions. I will be lent prescription anti-nausea patches by not one but two different DJs, gifted peach-flavored lube, and offered a loofah with an elderly couple's phone number Sharpie'd onto it—which, I later learn, is a common mode of communication for swingers in Florida's retirement community. But I don't know any of this yet, and my first night on the ship, which also happens to be the eve of my 31st birthday, passes in a blur.

By 7 p.m., I'm eating oxtail stew at a restaurant at the aft of the ship as Moe, a Floridian DJ who works for Temptation, explains the nuances of pickup artistry. "Think about it: You wouldn't ask a fish how to catch a fish," he says. "You ask a fisherman." He pauses. "You're the fish."

By 8, I'm sipping margaritas with Catherine Drysdale, one of the onboard sexperts and a female pleasure specialist. "I have an average of 30 orgasms per session," she says, "but my best is 72."

By 9, I've fallen in with a boisterous group of 20-somethings from Miami who—as some of the youngest people on board—have pledged to usher in my birthday with a round of shots.

By 10, I'm in the grand dining hall, an opulent expanse of sunset-colored decor with a chandelier that tinkles menacingly when the ship rocks in choppy waters. Eventually, everyone is funneled into the Stardust Theater for a variety show meant to preview the week's programming. There's a stand-up comedian who asks the crowd what they look for in a partner ("Breathing," one man in a baseball cap responds); an aerialist with impressive flexibility and corn silk blonde hair that appears to be permanently blowing in an invisible breeze; and a Canadian singer who bears a striking resemblance to Chappell Roan—at least until she follows her performance of "Lady Marmalade" with an unexpected, very competent rap break. She gets a standing ovation.

Afterward, it's straight to the on-site playroom, previously known as the Spinnaker Lounge. On a normal cruise, it serves as a destination for daytime activities like bingo and dance classes—but in preparation for the week's festivities, it's been given a complete makeover by Temptation's team to create an ambience befitting a sex party. They've brought in 36 fireproof mattresses, covered the ship's fluorescent lights with colored gels, and replaced the usual dining setup with a series of play spaces, including a custom-built black-and-red BDSM area, a jungle-themed enclave full of fake plants, and a thinly disguised voyeurs' area where individual rooms are demarcated by sheer white curtains. On the door is posted a series of rules, from "No means no" to guidelines around responsible alcohol consumption. "Clothing is optional, respect isn't," Temptation's rules state, noting that, to protect everyone's privacy, cameras and phones aren't allowed in clothing-optional areas.

THIS PAGE: BRUCE YAN/SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST VIA GETTY IMAGES. OPENING PAGES: RICHARD FEGLEY/PLAYBOY ARCHIVES.

Usually, the playroom hosts a variety of sex-related workshops during the day before reopening each evening at around 9 p.m. But tonight, ahead of the week's official playroom parties, they're holding an open house, where guests are encouraged to wander around and take stock of the amenities: everything from glory holes to spanking benches, a Saint Andrew's cross, and one very advanced-looking fuck machine. "We wanted them to have time in the playroom where there's no pressure to perform," one Temptation employee tells me, noting that the week's programming, which includes guided workshops and meet and greets, is designed to help couples break the ice.

The clock is creeping toward midnight, and I'm becoming pathetically aware of not wanting to spend my birthday alone. Lucky for me, I reunite with the rowdy Miami crew from before and my new friend Glenda, who also isn't dressed for the night's theme—which, apparently, is Candyland. This explains why everyone around me appears to be sucking on lollipops, but honestly, I didn't question it.

There are different dress codes for each event—from the Hawaiian-style Get Lei'd to Wild West to Stone Age—but as Glenda explains, people will be quick to lend you accessories: "Plus, most of the people here don't really care what you're wearing, but rather how much you're wearing." She gestures down at the pool deck, where hundreds of people in pastel colors are moshing to DMX's "Party Up (Up in Here)." "I love this song," says a beautiful 25-year-old from Miami, handing me a birthday shot.

We chase our tequila with lime 10 minutes before midnight, too impatient to wait before heading to the playroom—so at the exact moment of my birthday, I'm sitting on a banquette watching an elderly couple fuck onstage, the man's hand resting on his hip in a red carpet pose as Lana Del Rey's "Young and Beautiful" drifts languidly from the speakers. To their left, a woman with a rainbow butt plug is going to town on her partner's admirably average-sized penis.

For the most part, I find the experience of watching people have sex humanizing, even charming. I like seeing sensual moments between people, and with these mostly married couples, there's a degree of familiarity I find sweet. Glenda is less impressed. "He just put it in, with no foreplay or anything!" she points out. "And that guy still has his Converse on!"

By this point, we're sitting with our new friends Diego and Alejandra from Miami, who, like a majority of couples in this piece, have opted to have their names changed for anonymity. Things are heating up in the playroom, and when I feel Diego's hand on my knee, I know it's my time to go. "I'm really tired," I tell them before slipping out the door and onto the pool deck, where the party is in full swing.

As I look down from the veranda, it's a surreal sight. I was right, I think, to go in blind—because nothing I looked up online could have prepared me to spend six nights on a swingers' cruise, a rare solo woman among 1,000 couples ready to mix, mingle, and fuck.

In the days to come, I will see women in candy bras and self-proclaimed sugar daddies in bright-yellow suits. I will see sun-leathered hippies and pearl-clutching Republicans, high school sweethearts and Midwestern moms reduced to panting obedience by their own appetites. I will learn the difference between soft swap and full swap, unicorn and bull, cuckold and hotwife—and be assured, by no less than half a dozen enthusiastic strangers, that every woman has the capacity to squirt.

I will ride the crowded tourist bus to white-sand beaches, endure the lukewarm buffet eggs, take tequila shots with strangers, vomit in a cruise ship bathroom, and sample Mamajuana, an aphrodisiac concoction I later learn is made with the penises of nature's most well-endowed turtles.

I will be called a unicorn more times than I can count. I will feel strangers' hands on my thighs and be kissed by soft-lipped girls who don't care that I'm a journalist or that I won't be fucking them and their boyfriends, who are always named something like Kevin, or Paul, or, God forbid, Matt.

But tonight, I'm exhausted, drunk, and freshly 31—so I slip away to my stateroom, where I order a chocolate cake and a single hot dog before drifting off into a dreamless, amniotic sleep.

I MAY BE THE ONLY JOURNALIST on the cruise, but I'm not the only outsider—and as I wait for the cheerful barista to prepare my morning coffee, I ask him what he thinks of the crowd. He pauses, steam wand whistling, and thinks for a moment. "Everyone's very…free," he says delicately, noting that the clientele seems to be in high spirits—smiling wider and tipping bigger than the average American. It makes sense; everyone's here to drink and get laid, and they've already paid for their all-inclusive packages (ranging from $2,300 for windowless staterooms to $31,000 for a three-bedroom villa).

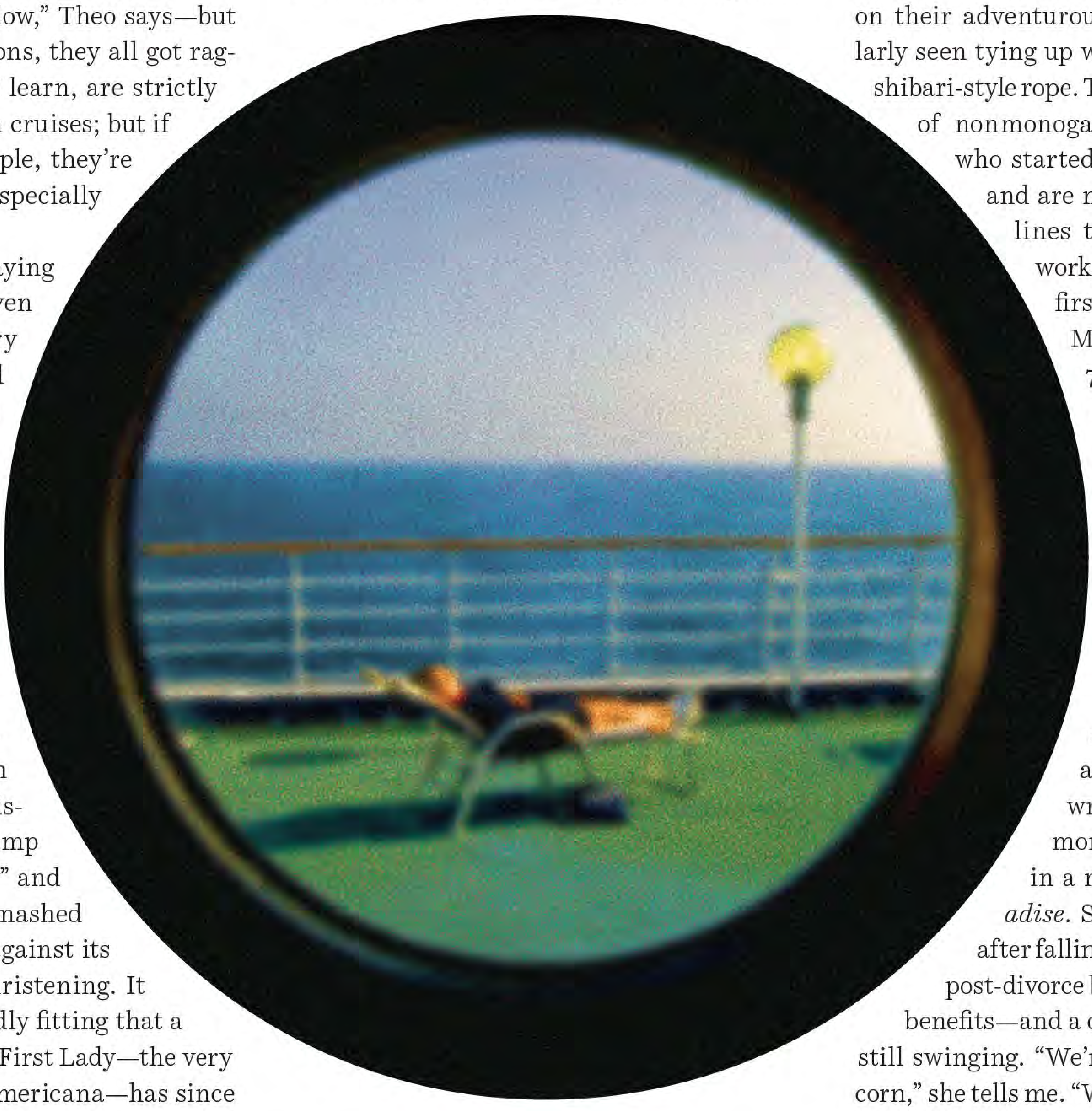
The ship's main demographic is Americans in their late 40s and 50s, though there are some in their 30s, 60s, and even 70s, as well as a smattering of international guests. On my way to breakfast, I pass the room of two self-proclaimed Frenchies, who've decorated the door with a banner and declared themselves "fluent in English, French, and sex." It seems that, overnight, nearly everyone's door has received a full makeover, with many now sporting holders for business cards that bear not professional emails, but pictures of couples with QR codes and headings like YOU'RE CUTE, LET'S FUCK. Many of the doors are covered in upside-down pineapples—the universal symbol of swinging—and one couple even has a large and vibrantly purple dildo suctioned to the door; it quivers rapaciously whenever the ship itself pitches or rocks in the rolling seas, which, as it turns out, is pretty often.

Today's our first full day at sea, and the hours on board are filled with a series of activities—including this morning's workshop, "Handjob Mastery," which, if you ask me, should have

"I've been in an open marriage for years, it turns out."

been called “All Hands on Dick.” I was excited to attend, but by the time I show up, it’s already over; as it turns out, daylight saving required us to turn our clocks back. As pleased-looking couples filter out of the double doors, I commiserate with Tina and Theo, tan 50-somethings who also missed the memo. “We had a bit of a late night,” Tina tells me, explaining that one of their friends had smuggled illicit drugs on board: something called PT-141, which is used off-label to treat erectile dysfunction. “We thought it would make us all horny, because of the increased blood flow,” Theo says—but instead of raging hard-ons, they all got raging headaches. Drugs, I learn, are strictly off-limits on Temptation cruises; but if you know the right people, they’re not impossible to find, especially if they’re prescription.

Tina and Theo are staying in one of the ship’s Haven Suites, an ultra-luxury private enclave reserved for the one percent—or technically two percent, if you look at the exact passenger ratio. The Haven has its own entrance, private villas, and a list of lavish amenities I don’t fully grasp until later that night, when I’m doomscrolling cruise facts on Google. That’s when I discover that Melania Trump is the ship’s “godmother” and that, 20 years ago, she smashed a bottle of champagne against its hull in a ceremonial christening. It feels both ironic and oddly fitting that a ship once blessed by the First Lady—the very image of mainstream Americana—has since been repurposed as a floating playground of ritualized sex.



JACQUES LANGEVIN/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Swinging, too, is a quintessentially American pastime: According to one oft-repeated anecdote, the phenomenon of wife-swapping took root in U.S. military communities during and after World War II, when some savvy pilots framed it as a way to care for their friends’ wives in the event of their deaths. Riding the heels of 1960s sexual liberation, the practice spread to the suburbs and later to formalized scenes, like clubs, and magazines, which were, at one point, among the most practical ways for couples to connect and reach one another. “At that point, you really had to want it,” says Bryan, a 40-year-old swinger from Oklahoma whose wife bought him a collection of old lifestyle magazines as a gift. “Back then, it was difficult. You had to put out an ad, and you had to travel to someone. Now you can hop online and meet someone in five minutes.”

Much of this networking, I learn, happens in Facebook groups; there’s even a designated one for this cruise, where couples post photos and introductions in the hopes of connecting pre-embarkment. It’s a small community, but a tight-knit one: Only 2 to 4 percent of American adults self-report as swingers, though this statistic can hardly be accurate given the fact that almost none of them admit to the practice.

Only a handful of couples I meet are open about being “in the lifestyle,” which is how swingers refer to it. There are childhood sweethearts who’d never been with anyone else; high-powered lawyers looking for an opportunity to let loose; and tense middle-aged couples who were headed for divorce until they admitted they wanted to sleep with other people.

In almost every case, their families have no idea what they do in their free time: “I told everyone I’m going on a different cruise that’s departing on the same date,” a middle-aged woman tells me, one of several couples who have chosen an “alibi cruise” to throw nosy family members off the scent. At the Temptation Resort in Cancún, they even have what’s called the “vanilla phone,” a separate phone line with a separate number, which employees answer with the name of a different resort to preserve their guests’ anonymity.

Despite the size and scope of the ship, I find I still run into the same handful of people. There’s Miranda and Cory, an interracial couple from Miami who pride themselves on their adventurous spirits and are regularly seen tying up willing volunteers in red shibari-style rope. There’s “the Quad,” a pair of nonmonogamous married couples who started dating a few years ago and are now moving across state lines to integrate their lives, work, and families. Many are first-timers, but some—like Margaret and John, two 70-somethings who got into swinging only after retirement—go on adult cruises every single month. “We have the most amazing sex life,” says Margaret. “But none of our friends would ever know.”

Others are candid about it. Sarah Jolicoeur, an author and coach, wrote openly about her nonmonogamous relationship in a memoir, *Journey to Paradise*. She got into the lifestyle after falling for her personal trainer post-divorce but found she enjoyed the benefits—and a dozen years later, they’re still swinging. “We’re not looking for a unicorn,” she tells me. “We’re looking for a wife.”

This type of arrangement is not common. Most of the swingers I meet engage in a more structured form of play. They start with soft swaps, which means messing around without penetrative sex. Others allow penetration, but draw the line at kissing, finding the kissing more intimate than physical sex. Full swap, which is what most people think of as swinging, includes sex with another couple but often has an array of rules attached—such as everyone being in the same room at the same time or specific activities that are off-limits.

Many couples emphasize the importance of doing things together, but a few people I meet allow one-on-one play or grant their partner the occasional “hall pass” when they don’t find the other half of a couple attractive—a frequent complaint I hear on the ship from people who bemoan the common conundrum of gorgeous women paired with older or otherwise less-appealing men. Though, as one swinger named Ellie tells me, it's common for older swingers to invest more in their appearance than their monogamous counterparts: "When we're in the outside world and see a fit older couple, we immediately think swingers."

As she tells me this, we're sitting in bed in a stateroom with her husband, Jackson, and their friends Bella and Jase, two high school sweethearts who got the itch to experiment in their mid-20s. Having grown up together in a small town, they had never been with anyone else until one day, Bella—who identifies as bisexual—posed a question. "I was like, 'Have you ever wondered what it would be like to kiss someone else?'" she recalls. Now they're making up for lost time: Before boarding, they spent seven days with Ellie and Jackson on a competing lifestyle cruise called Bliss, with only one day of rest in between.

This seems like a lot of hedonistic revelry, but for Bella and Jase, it's also work: The pair are among the most prominent "lifestyle influencers," which—in this lifestyle—has less to do with pictures of private jets and avocado toast, and more to do with sharing their most intimate experiences with the world. After opening their marriage, they started creating content about swinging on TikTok under the moniker 4OurPlay; the business now spans from video games to merch and is their primary source of income.

For them, swinging has offered a kind of second adolescence: a way to experiment with other people together, forge strong friendships as an adult, and develop new sexual skills. Recently, they crossed a new item off their bucket list, the "airtight experience," which is pretty much what it sounds like: "Sex where all your holes are filled," says Ellie with a shy giggle.

Some couples, I learn, approach the cruises with a set of rigid sexual goals, whether that's an exact number of hookups or specific fantasies they wish to enact. "Personally, we don't have, like, a checklist that we need to cross out," says Theo. "But we were talking to some friends of ours, you know, and they're like, 'Oh no, I need to suck a dick every single day. Ideally two dicks.'" He pauses: "Again, these are people who are surgeons."

Others approach the cruise not as swingers, but as what Bryan likes to call "dirty vanillas": people who are essentially monogamous but just like to take their top off and get the party started. And some, like Ellie and Jackson, start as dirty vanillas and wind up as swingers. "We love to party, and it's a party cruise," Ellie says, explaining that when they first embarked on a Temptation cruise three years ago, they had no intentions of swinging until a couple invited them back to their hotel room to "chat" on the final night. "When we arrived, the girl was fully naked, and she asked me, 'Have you ever seen your wife kiss another guy?'" recalls Jackson. "I looked at her across the room, and she gave me two thumbs up." The rest, as they say, is history.

HECTOR MATA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Over the course of these conversations, I come to realize that Temptation offers a vibe, a background, and a mood: a space where anything could, theoretically, happen. When I ask guests what they and others are looking for from the cruise, the answers are immediate and unanimous: "a fantasy," "an escape," "a release," a space to be themselves, free from the confines of everyday life. "It's a walkable community of like-minded people where you can just let your freak flag fly," says Jolicoeur, "and be whoever you want to be that day."

What she doesn't say is that you can do that without committing to being that person every day—which, for many in the lifestyle, is an essential part of the arrangement. "People want a secret for themselves," says Davia Frost, a sex and intimacy coach charged with teaching workshops on the basics of erotic power dynamics. "By day, they get to be the doctors and professors, and at night, they get to be the kitten and the bull."

As a sex writer, I find this tracks. But after talking with numerous couples, I'm struck by how many people struggle to make sense of these desires. "I was raised very conservative, and my entire business and career is built upon destroying other men and taking their shit. So it's difficult for a man like that to be like, 'I like the idea of watching you be fucked by another guy,'" says Theo, a self-identified alpha male who kept his desires secret for years. At first, they manifested as jealousy over Tina's prior partners—but after going to therapy, he realized he just hadn't had the tools to interpret what he was feeling. "I had big emotions, and I thought it was anger," Theo says. "But I was actually just tremendously curious, and I wanted to hear all about it."

Now the pair is exploring swinging for the first time, an experience they credit with introducing new depth, intimacy, and understanding to their relationship.

Our conversation sticks with me, both because of Theo's surprising honesty and our apparent political differences. Throughout our interview, he expresses his emotions with impressive self-awareness but also throws around words like "soyboy," "cuck," and "loser" to describe other men who want the same thing he does. "I just have a feeling that they're really, really conservative," I later tell Alexa Andre, an on-site sexologist, podcaster, and veteran of Temptation cruises. "Have you seen that before?"

"Oh yeah," she says breezily. "On one cruise, I even saw a MAGA hat. Here, they're all free love and sexual liberation. But everyone's a Republican when they get off the boat."

I'M ON A PRIVATE ISLAND in the Bahamas when—for the first time all trip—I pull out my book and decide to relax. Then, like clockwork, a voice calls out from 10 or 15 feet down the beach. "Hey, Camille!" shouts a naked man, walking toward me with an equally naked woman by his side. "Miss lady journalist! We want to talk with you!"

"No, I know. What I'm saying is that you also now have them."

Ten minutes later, I'm deep in conversation with Billy and Mary, two native Floridians who met on OurTime, a dating site for 50-plus singles looking to find love. This is their first adult vacation as an established couple. Though, as it turns out, Mary had previously worked as a booking agent for a cruise line in the '70s or '80s and says that while there were still swingers then, they had to operate under the radar: "I knew a captain once who said, 'Don't send those people down here. I don't want people fucking in my dining room.'"

These days, Mary suspects the ship's crew enjoys witnessing the festivities. "It's come a long way," she says, gathering her sarong loosely around her exposed breasts and looking out at the ocean. "Over the years, things have gotten more accepting."

She's right: Open relationships have been gradually destigmatized, with polycules and ENM (ethical nonmonogamy) becoming common parlance, at least among a certain segment of Brooklynites. Which is why, to me, the idea of swinging seems oddly quaint, even old-fashioned: a form of nonmonogamy where the carrots don't touch the peas, and the essential fantasy of the American family is preserved, save for a knowing wink.

The longer I spend at sea, the more I come to see that swinging provides the same sort of experience proffered by the luxury cruise itself: a high degree of stimulation, pleasure, and indulgence offered within a safe, controlled environment. Swingers can indulge in hedonistic fucking with the knowledge that this is only a vacation from monogamy, not a betrayal of their relationship. It's indulgent, self-contained, and, like all good vacations, almost more fun to think about than to actually experience.

In David Foster Wallace's famous cruise article—which I read only later, on the way home—he describes the despair and loneliness of a week at sea, drawing a contrast between what these vacations offer and what they actually deliver. The luxury cruise industry is steeped in irony, a symbol of American excess—and ironically, it positions consumption as the solution to the deeper, unmet desires of life under capitalism. But if the typical luxury vacation is designed to induce relaxation, then Temptation is selling guests a vision of community, freedom, and pleasure that's absent in their day-to-day. Instead of being pampered, people want to let loose, to check their inhibitions at the door, and explore who they are outside the norms and obligations of work, parenthood, and everyday life.

In short, Temptation provides the ingredients for people to have a good time, which, ironically, is more a process of subtraction than addition. Because people take their clothes off, there are no phones or cameras to pull you out of the moment—and while alcohol and food are free, Wi-Fi will cost you hundreds of bucks. As a result, many people choose to part ways with their devices, making plans through word of mouth, notes left on doors, or dialing one another's rooms. The result is not just a sense of unplugging, but of embracing spontaneity. "On Temptation," says Cruz, "what creates the success of the brand is the sense of community that happens when everyone is in the same state of mind."

That's certainly the case on the final day at sea, when Cruz takes the stage to announce the afternoon's entertainment: a naked wrestling match. I look out from the veranda down to deck 12, where a tub of red Jell-O beckons, glittering and emulsive in the Caribbean sun. Next to it, the two competitors are announced: Miss Mexico, a curvy Latina with heaving breasts, and Miss USA, a heavily tattooed blonde. They take a moment to get acquainted, making out in the pool of Jell-O as porno music pipes through the speakers. Then Cruz—who is dressed in head-to-toe Mario-themed regalia—blows on a whistle, and the match is on.

"Who do you think will win, short stack or blondie?" asks a nude middle-aged man, jerking his head toward the center of the action. "I'm thinking short stack," says his wife, and together, the three of us lean over the railing to watch. As Miss Mexico lunges at Miss USA, everything jiggles: her ass, the Jell-O, the boat. The deafening roar of the crowd quiets my inner monologue, and all I can do is look out across the ship at hundreds of tan, sunscreen-slathered Americans, hooting and hollering as the spectacle unfolds. These are CEOs and lawyers, firemen and judges, dental hygienists, interior decorators, and your next-door neighbors. And in less than 48 hours, they'll all be back on dry land, saying please and thank you and making Zoom appointments and definitely not, as is happening right now, forcibly motorboating Miss USA before twerking their way offstage.

I entered this assignment with a sense of skepticism—about swinging, about cruises, and certainly about the intersection of the two. But by day five, the energy has rubbed off on me, and I can't help but smile when I see people expressing their sexuality with such reckless abandon. What it says about society at large—that so many Americans need this much permission, choreography, and spectacle to feel free—is perhaps more troubling. But looking around, it's clear that beneath the lube and the sunscreen and the themed costumes are people who, like so many others, are looking for space to be themselves. And for the next 27 hours, we're all dedicated to the same thing: keeping the fantasy afloat.

SILLY RABBIT
Our mascot, in the most enviable of positions. H. Crowne's Anomaly necklace *($222, hcrowne .com)* features a detachable rabbit head pendant to fasten on a chain—or wherever else you might desire.

CLOSE

CONTACT

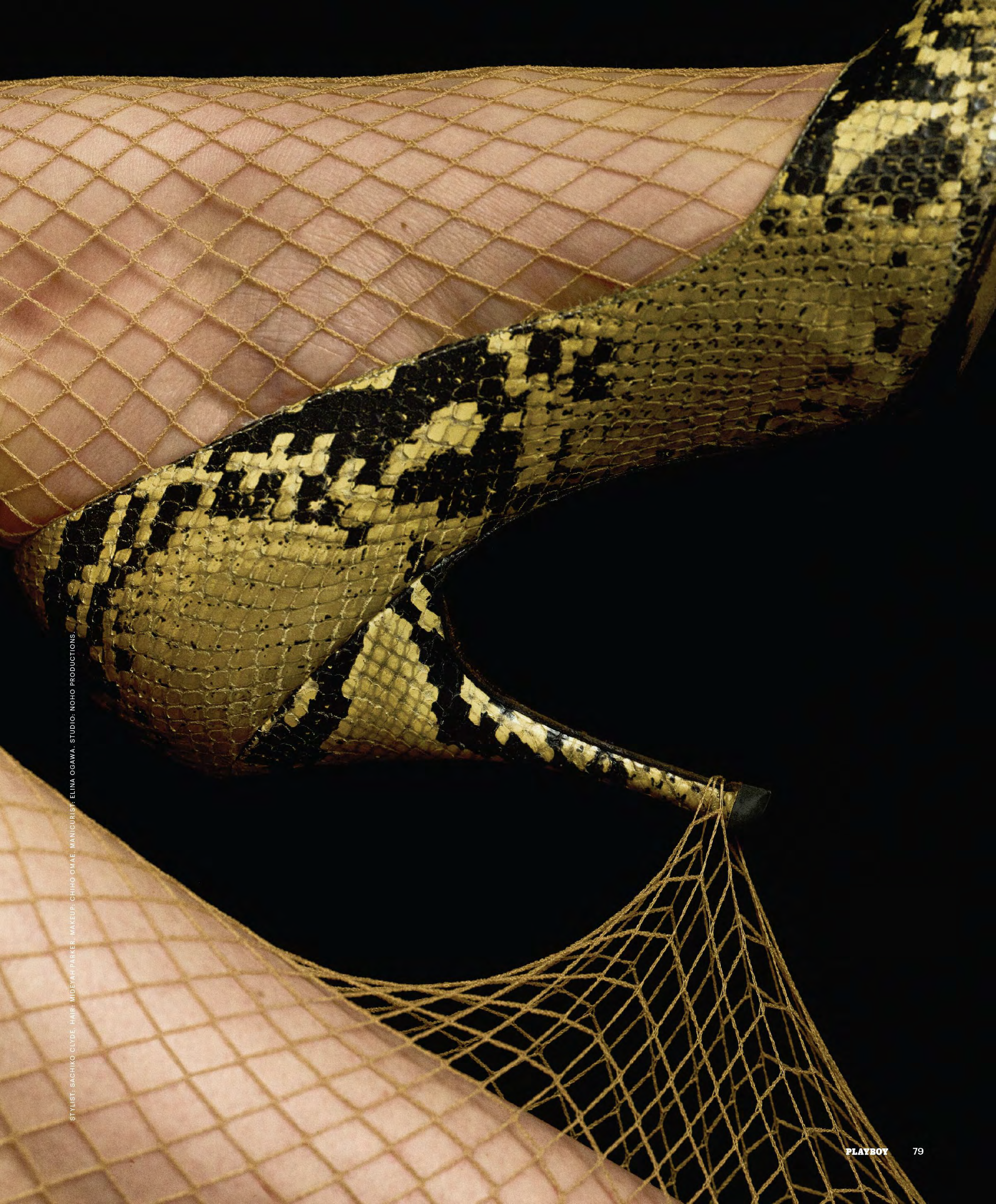
Photographer **Betina Du Toit** shamelessly takes *Playboy* up close and personal.

WARDROBE COURTESY OF COU COU INTIMATES, KIKI DE MONTPARNASSE, MEUCHNER, GUESTHOUSE NEW YORK, WOLFORD, DONALD J. PILNER, ALAÏA, AND HANES.

RED MEANS GO From the lights to the lingerie, there's only one color that's guaranteed to set the mood.

PASSING GLANCE
To change your perspective or lift your spirits, sometimes all you need is a little peek.

SILENT TREATMENT
If some things are best left unsaid, others are best left undressed (or, at the very most, wrapped in a pair of fishnets).



STYLIST: SACHIKO CLYDE. HAIR: MIDEYAH PARKER. MAKEUP: CHIHO OMAE. MANICURIST: ELINA OGAWA. STUDIO: NOHO PRODUCTIONS.

The People's Playmate

She won the Great Playmate Search—and then, our hearts. Now **Lauren Summer** gets to live her full pinup fantasy as Miss February.

BY JACQUELINE DETWILER-GEORGE PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANA O'HERLIHY

NO
SWIMMING
ALLOWED

LAUREN SUMMER'S MODELING CAREER arguably began when she stopped in front of a giant photo of Adriana Lima in the window of a Victoria's Secret in her hometown of Orlando, Florida. When Summer saw it, "something clicked in my nerdy little self with glasses," she says. "I was like, 'That's what I wanna do.' Not because she looked hot. She exuded this confidence that I wanted so badly."

At the time, Summer says, she was an arts nerd: She played flute in her high school band, loved lit class, and spent her free period playing games with the drama kids. She started modeling in Orlando, but as she got older, her look didn't mesh with the family-style gigs available there. Work pulled her to bigger cities, including Los Angeles, where she now lives.

Her dream gig was posing for *Playboy*, which she calls "cool, iconic, and part of the cultural ether." In 2017, *Playboy* posted a lingerie snap she shot with a photographer in New York City to its Instagram. The photo launched Summer's career, catapulting her social media to millions of followers in months. It allowed Lauren to pursue her dream full-time—modeling for major swimwear and lingerie brands—while living, as she calls it, a soft life: morning jazz and sea breezes and scrapbooking and long walks by the Pacific.

When *Playboy* announced the first digital-only Great Playmate Search in 2025, Summer applied. She didn't think she'd win and mostly forgot about it—especially as she planned a life-altering trip to Japan. Over the years, even as Summer's confidence had grown with modeling, she had developed an intense fear of flying that forced her to mourn her bucket list trips. At last, after years of therapy, she was able to fly again, visiting Kyoto and Tokyo with a stop in Hawaii on the way home. She was "an absolute emotional mess" when she got to this place she had always imagined: "I was like, 'I'm here and I did it. I did the hardest thing.'"

When Summer returned home, she checked her text messages and saw she'd reached the quarterfinals of the

STYLING BY LANA JAY LACKEY. SET DESIGN BY MILENA GORUM. MAKEUP BY KAYLI DAVIS. HAIR BY RACHEL LITA. NAIL ARTIST: NATALIE MINERVA. STUDIO: NOVA STUDIOS LA.
PRODUCTION: PERFECT PROJECTS. THE GREAT PLAYMATE SEARCH JUDGES: SHANNA MOAKLER, BRANDE RODERICK, DAPHNÉE DUPLAIX, SUMMER ALTICE, AND GILLIAN NATION.

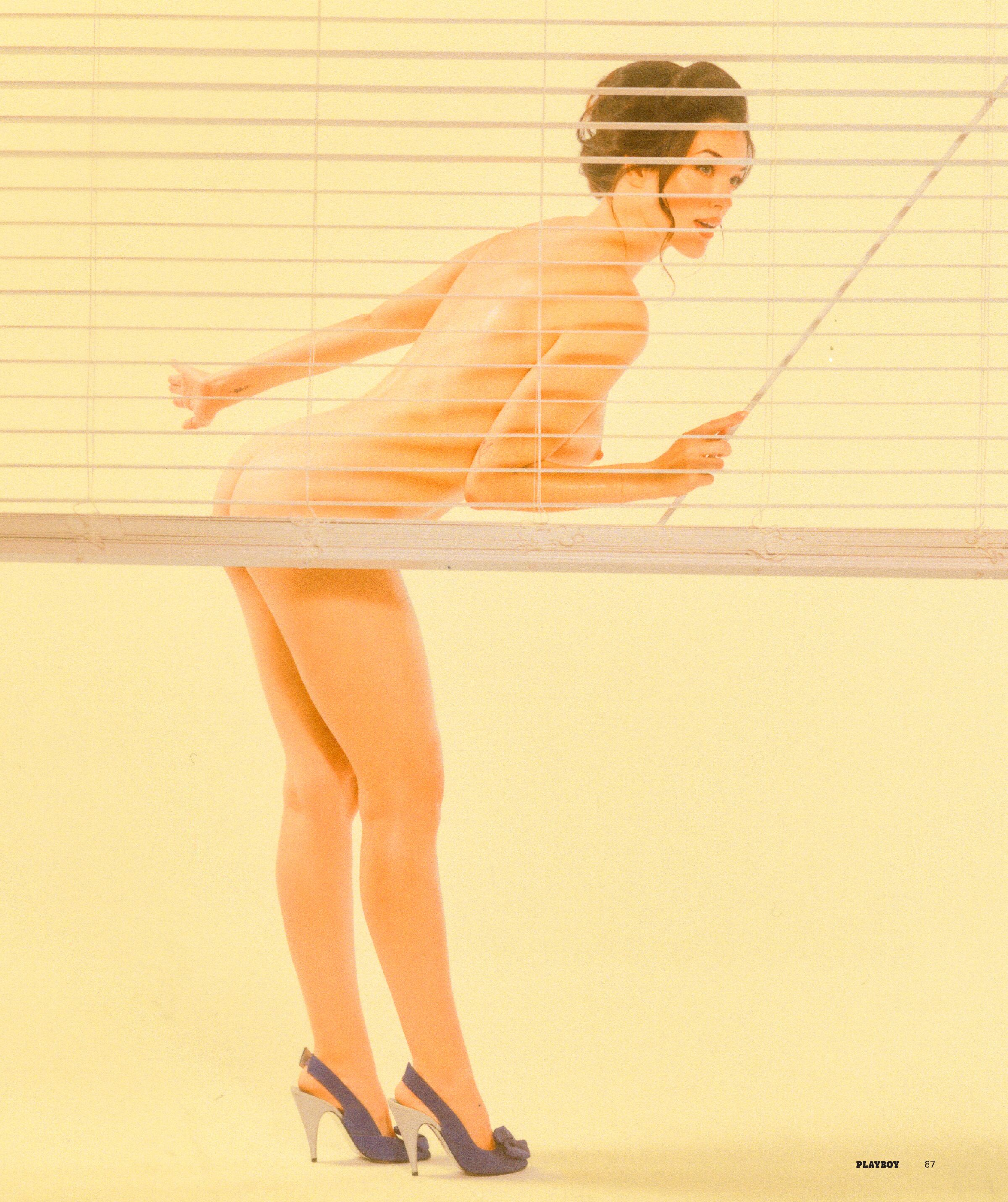
Playmate Search. "I was like, 'Holy… I think maybe I stand a chance?'" she recalls. She went full throttle trying to reach her goal. "I was like, 'I am promoting it. I'm telling everyone that I want it.' I was posting about it every single day because this is something that I always wanted, to be a *Playboy* Playmate, ever since I was of legal age."

After more than 17,000 entries and 1.7 million votes, Summer won—a surreal experience. "It honestly just hit me in the past week or so that I'm not dreaming and that this is actually my reality now," she says.

Her Playmate shoot with photographer Alana O'Herlihy was another wish fulfilled. Summer had envisioned a 1950s-style pinup shoot. When she arrived on set, she learned that was exactly what O'Herlihy had in mind. "It was insane!" says Summer. O'Herlihy took her inspiration from celebrated pinup artist Alberto Vargas, who produced more than 150 paintings for *Playboy* in the 1960s and '70s.

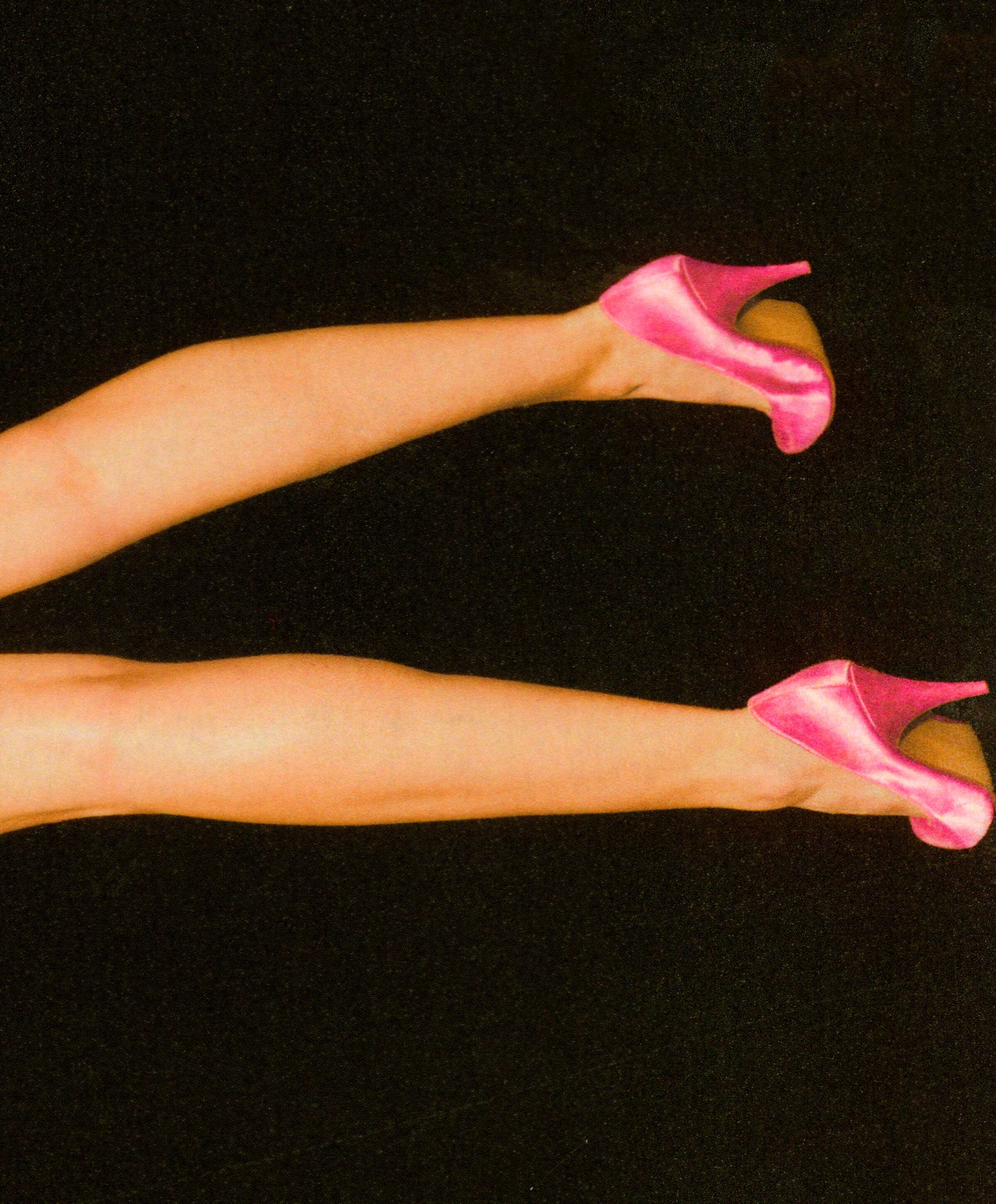
Now that Summer has built the life and work she once imagined, she wants to use her platform to educate people about women's sexual health and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), a severe form of PMS she has been diagnosed with. "I obviously have such a big male following," she says. "So I'm constantly pink-pilling my audience, like 'Here's what PMDD is, and here's what this means.'" You never know what you're going to get with her online personality, Summer says, be it a "booty shot" or posts on social issues.

It's not all seriousness at the house of Summer, however. The ideal is to live a life like her inspiration, Pamela Anderson, whom Summer has "adored, in every iteration." She says, "I want to live out all my hot years, crushing it, posing naked in *Playboy*, being authentic, having fun, and then just having a house with a garden with my family and dogs." She pauses. "That's the end goal: Live it to the fullest."



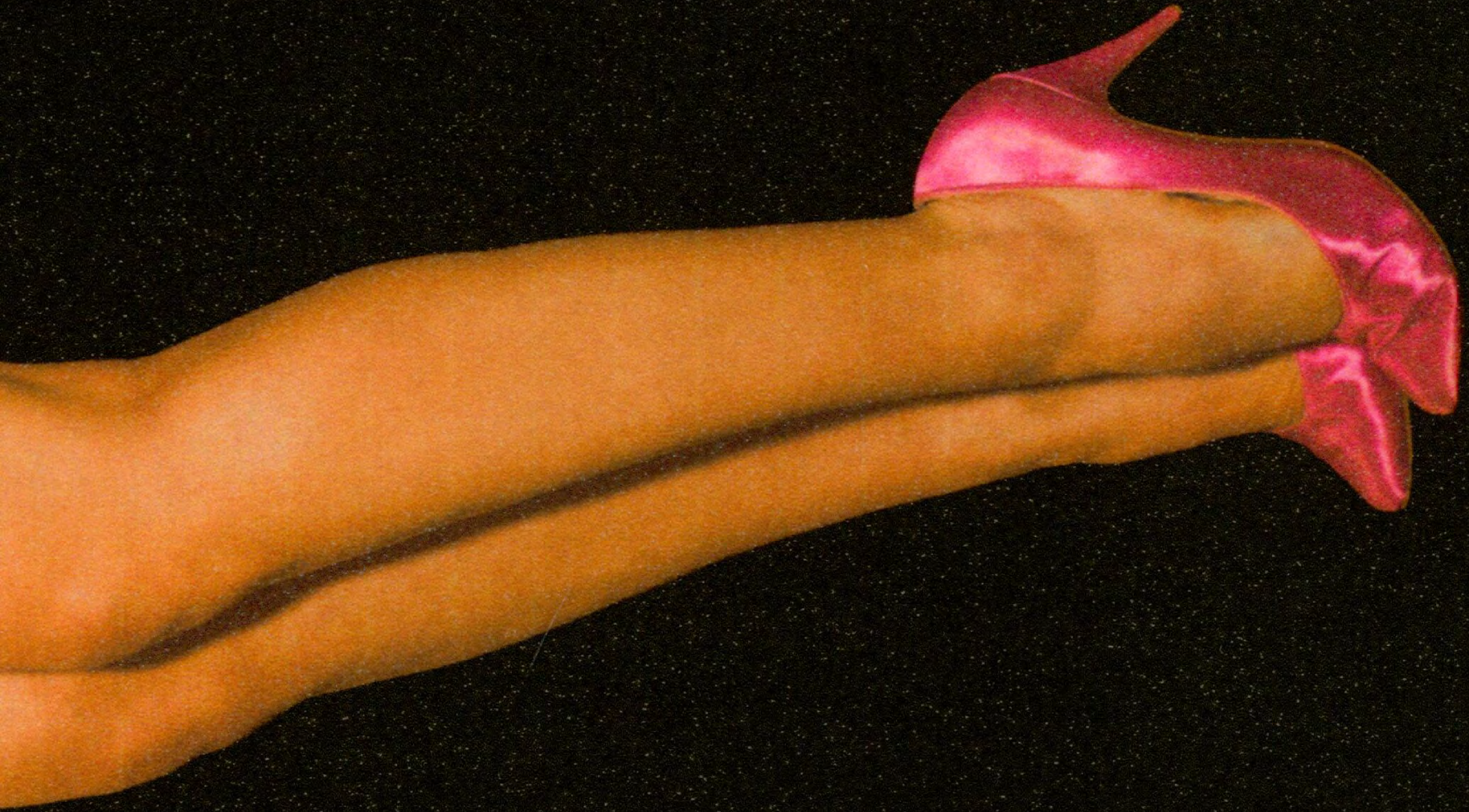
MISS FEBRUARY

LAUREN SUMMER

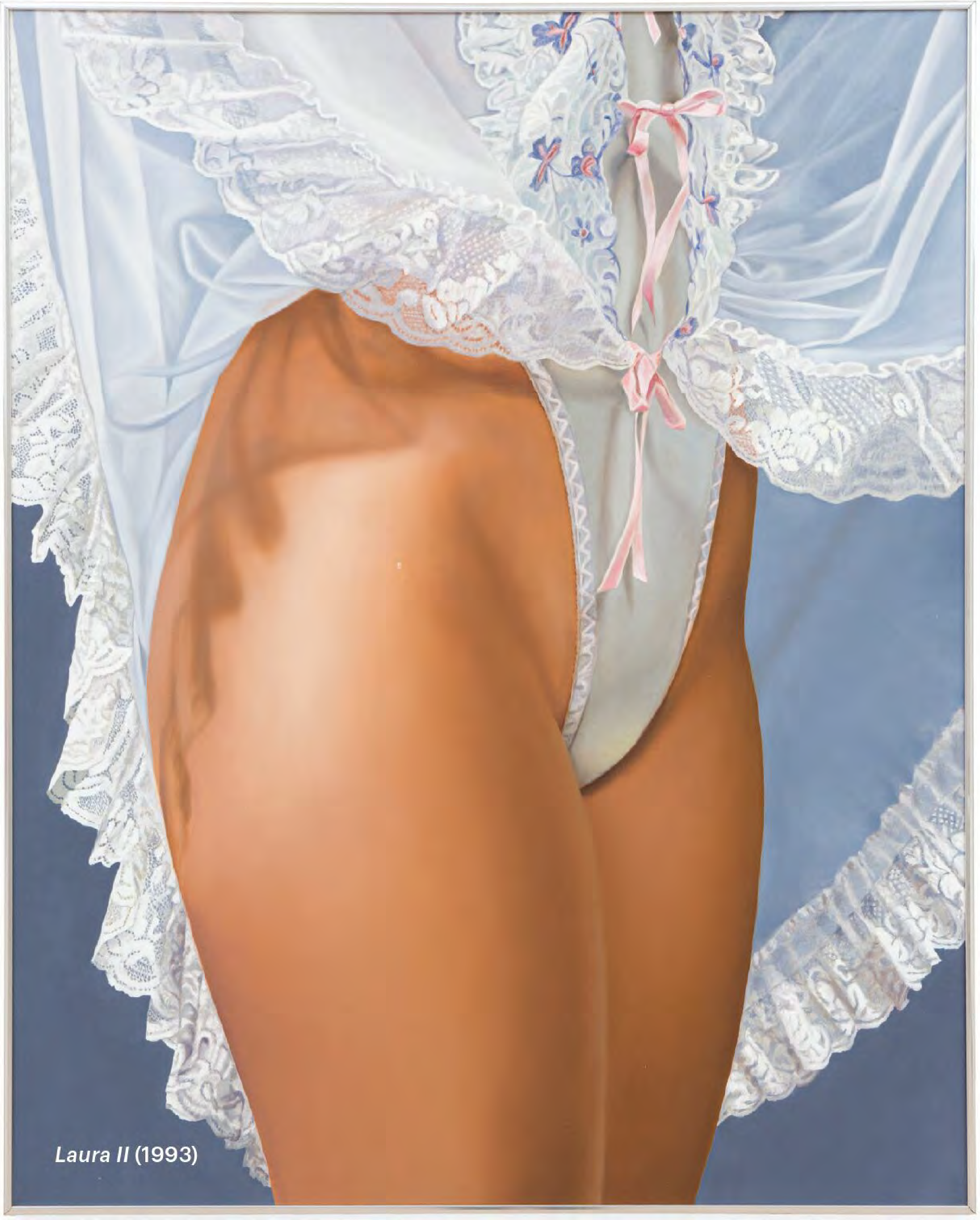


MISS FEBRUARY

LAUREN SUMMER



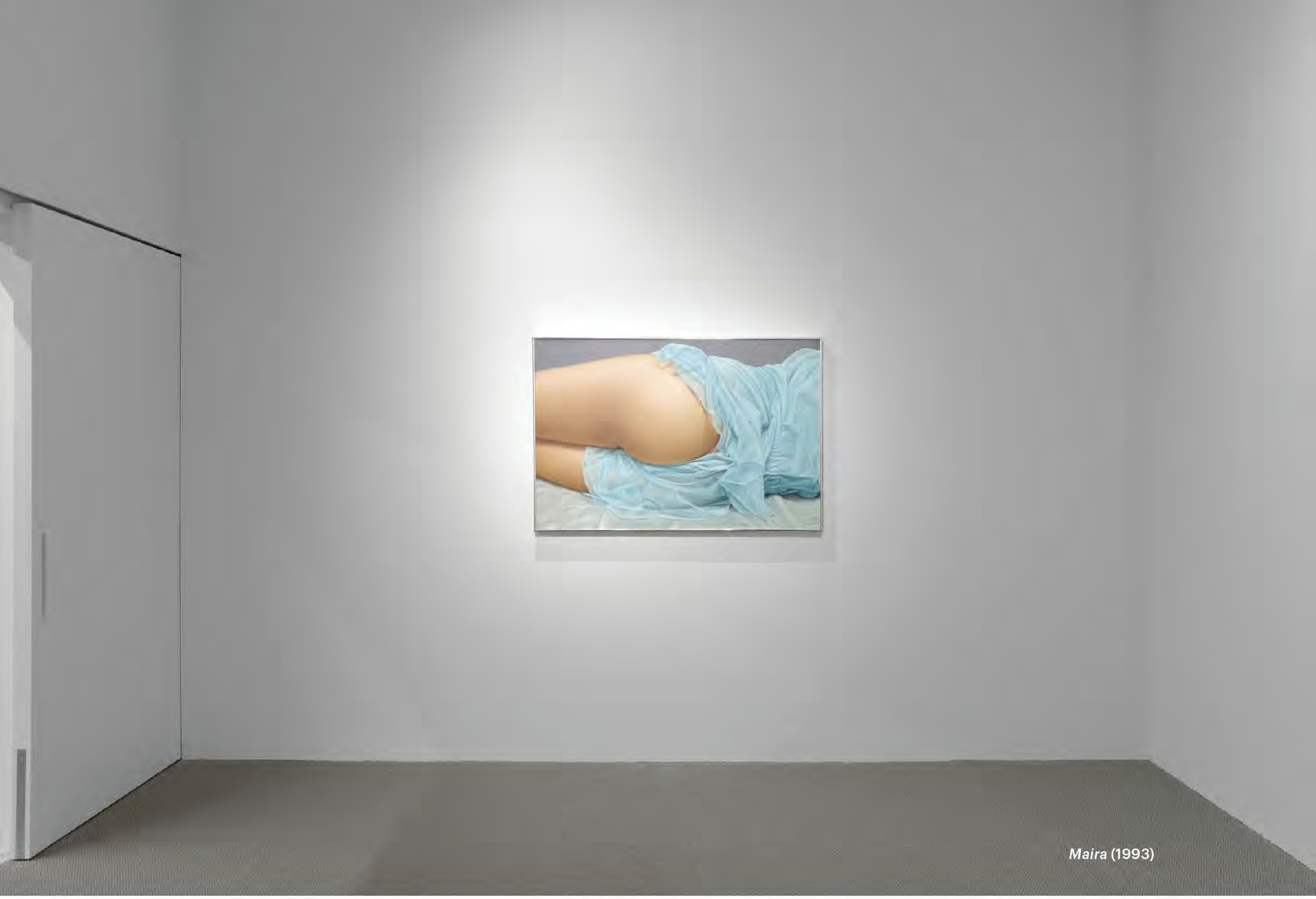
FRAME OF REFERENCE



Laura II (1993)

John Kacere, the controversial painter whose erotic work shaped fashion and film, gets another look.

BY PHILLIP PICARDI



Maira (1993)

You may not know the name John Kacere, but you've seen his influence. Picture the opening scene of *Lost in Translation*, the camera framed on a rear view of Scarlett Johansson in sheer pink lingerie. Or the pre-spring 2026 ad campaign for Loewe, a close-up on green undies hugging a shapely behind half-shielded by a leather jacket. Or maybe you've seen dudes wearing a Supreme T-shirt printed with Kacere's photorealistic painting *Maude '77*, showing a woman's ruffled white slip hiked up to show gauzy briefs.

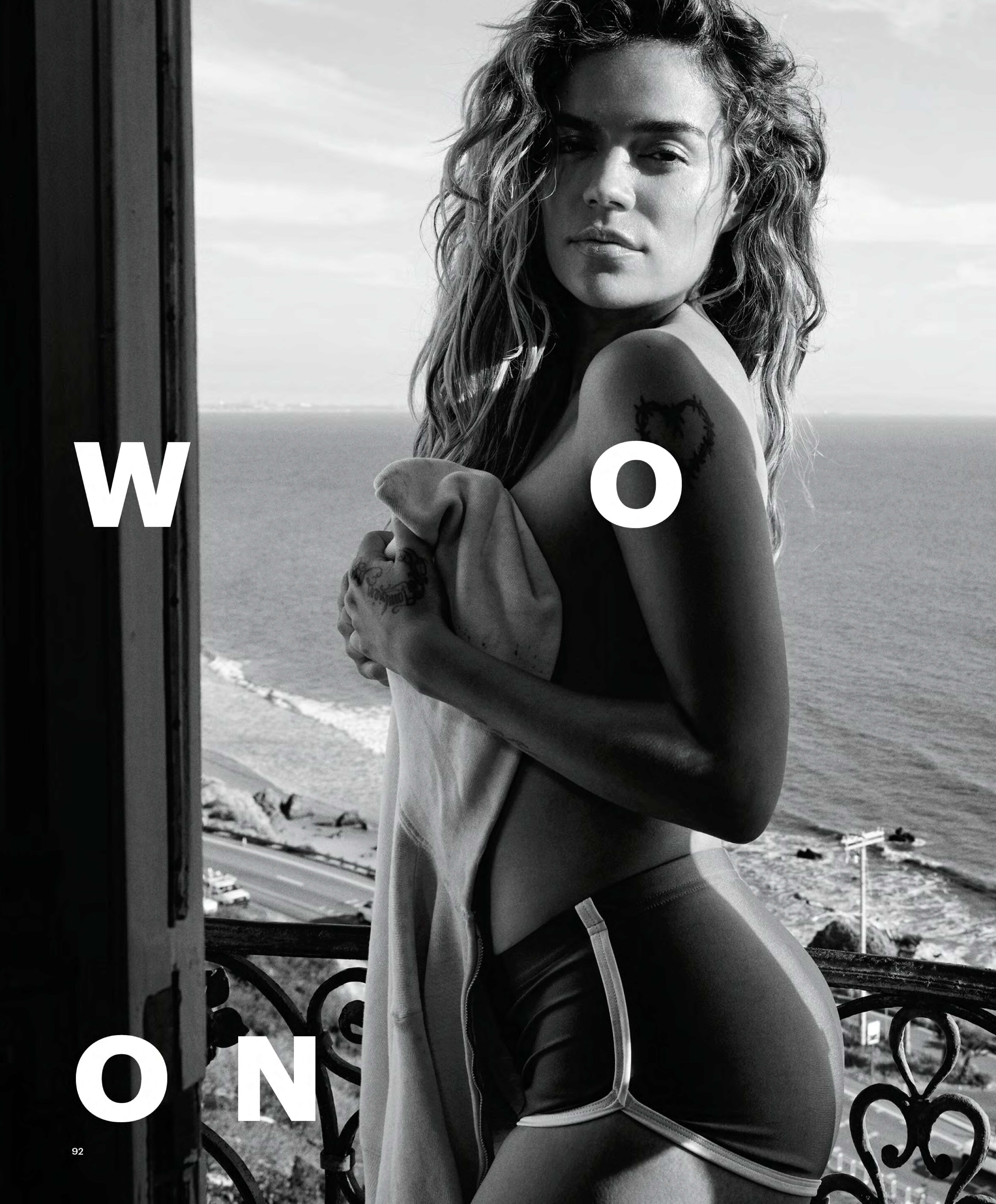
New York's elite Salon 94 gallery recently mounted a monthlong exhibition of Kacere's works: 16 paintings, all of them depicting a woman's midsection in revealing lingerie, often in epic proportions, along with 15 drawings and photographs. Kacere, who died in 1999, began his career as an abstract expressionist but in the late '60s turned his eye to women's bodies or, rather, just the middle of them. His work courted the rage of feminists, who condemned his male gaze. He countered that his work wasn't about sex, but sexuality. "There's a difference," he said during a museum talk in 1976.

In our OnlyFans moment, defined by a kind of self-broadcast intimacy, you'd think his legacy would be ready for an uncomplicated renaissance. But of course that's not the case. "We're in both a prudish and pornographic era," says Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, curator of the Salon 94 show. "On the one hand, there's a rise in this performative femininity," she notes, pointing to everyone from beauty queens in the White House to TikTok influencers as evidence. "But that's coexisting with the erosion of female agency," she adds, alluding to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the rise of the tradwife, and the decline of working mothers in the American workforce.

You can't deny Kacere's talent. He worked in meticulously thin layers, which helped him capture the luminosity of the silk fabrics and underwear or the tenderness of his sitter's skin. The paintings "glow," Greenberg Rohatyn says, in a way that's "beautiful but overwhelming." But his deliberate close-ups—his paintings rarely show a woman's face—also create tension. During a talk in the gallery, the artist Mickalene Thomas encouraged viewers to observe his works as landscapes to better understand his contributions to the artistic canon, but it's also easy to see them as simple objectification. At least one past model has disputed that she consented to her sitting, saying she felt pressured (by her father, no less) to pose for Kacere.

Greenberg Rohatyn insists Kacere's paintings are "about longing versus consumption." In her view, you actually don't want to see what's beyond the frame—not because you don't care about the woman, but because the painting is asking you to contemplate only what's directly in front of you. And, in turn, you must be brave and willing enough to confront the feelings that arise from standing before it.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SALON 94. © JOHN KACERE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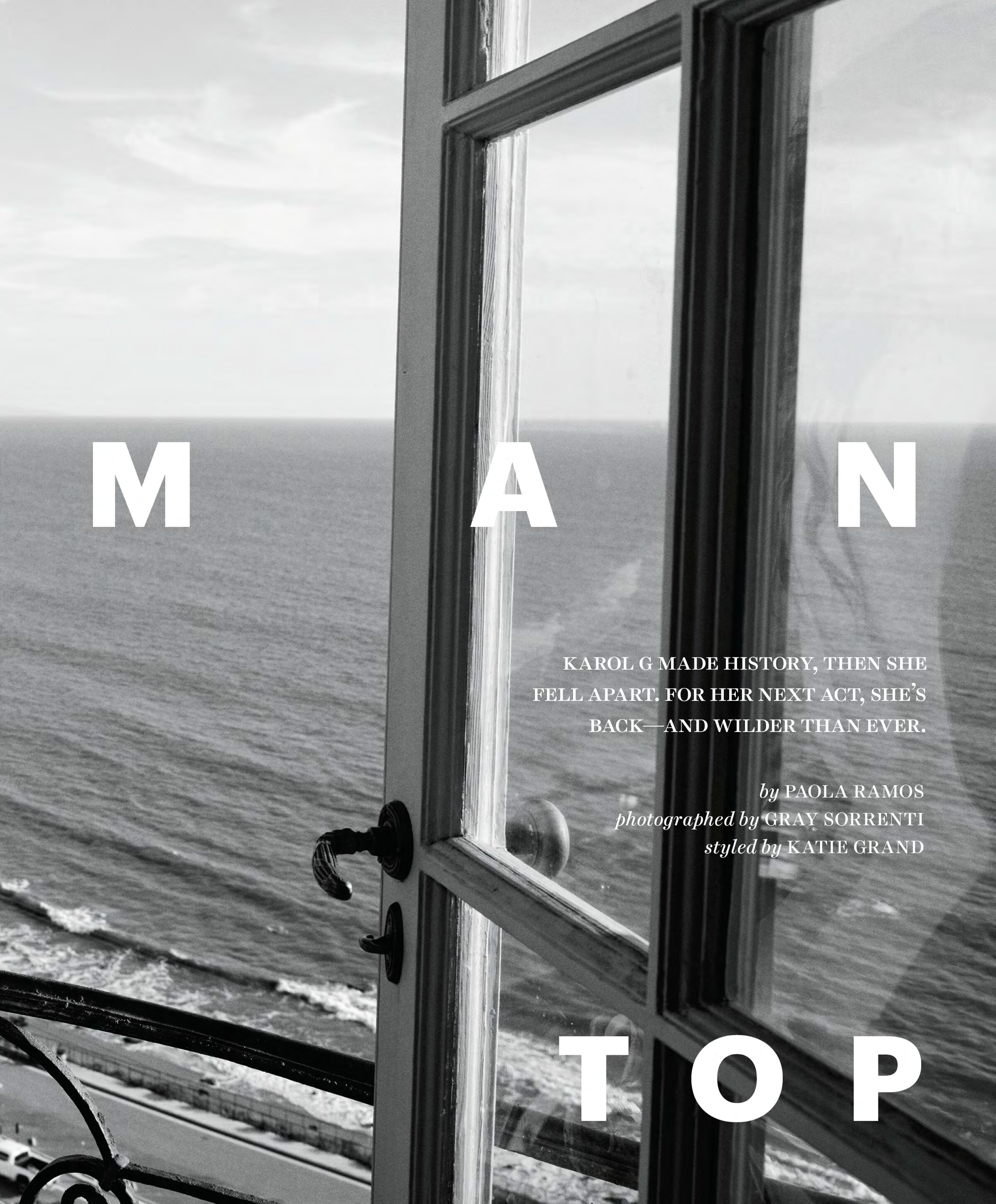


MAN

KAROL G MADE HISTORY, THEN SHE FELL APART. FOR HER NEXT ACT, SHE'S BACK—AND WILDER THAN EVER.

by PAOLA RAMOS
photographed by GRAY SORRENTI
styled by KATIE GRAND

TOP

“I love women who show their power through their bodies.”

KAROL G is in her "fuck it" era.

The 35-year-old record-breaking Colombian pop superstar is on the verge of reaching another milestone. No, it's not the fact that she's about to make history as the first Latina to headline Coachella—it's that she's stepping into the most authentic, unfiltered version of herself.

Early in her career, Karol G—who was born Carolina Giraldo Navarro in Medellín—declined to pose for *SoHo*, a Colombian men's magazine. She worried people would judge her. Now she's on the cover of *Playboy*. Carolina always imagined she would have a family by the time she reached her 30s. Now she's newly (and proudly) single. She typically shies away from politics. Now she's weighing whether to publicly call out ICE when she takes the stage.

But the sentiment signals so much more than an unguarded Karol G. That's her, shedding layers of pressure, expectations, fears, and pain, slowly making room for a new voice that even she seems surprised to discover.

The world has come to know Karol G's voice through her reggaeton music—a hypermasculine genre she reclaimed and expanded, fusing pop, trap, ballads, and Caribbean symphonies that can take you from feeling like you're at a Colombian street party to reflecting about your latest breakup. Through the years, she's racked up major awards, including one Grammy and several Latin Grammys and Billboard Music Awards, which is why most people would have never detected the shakiness behind her voice last year. Coming off the high of her 62-show *Mañana Será Bonito* tour in 2024—the first global stadium tour ever headlined by a Latina artist, selling more than 2 million tickets—she embarked on a downward spiral. Her album *Tropicoqueta* was received with mixed reactions. Her relationship with Colombian singer Feid ended. She no longer knew who she was. "When I woke up on January 1, 2026," she says, "I told myself, 'No more crying.'"

In many ways, her upcoming performance at the world's most influential music festival will be Karol G's rebirth.

You're days away from making history at Coachella.

I have them counted. I actually have a mini board on my nightstand. I started when there were 10 weeks left, and now it's almost here. When I received the call, I felt like a huge weight fell on me. They called me and told me—in Spanish—that I was going to be the first Latina to close the festival. I feel like it's a show for my community, for the world, but it's a show that's very much for me.

Through this rehearsal process, have you discovered a new version of yourself?

Completely. I thought that this was going to be like my consecration, but I actually feel like it's the beginning. This is the first time in my life that I feel I'm going to see myself as the artist in the same caliber as the stage that I'm stepping on. I told [choreographer] Parris Goebel, "Don't think of what I'm capable of; I want us to build the show that you *dream* of for me. Let's unite

our universes—you from dance, me from my Latina community. And I'll figure out how to keep up."

The country is very different from the last time you performed at Coachella in 2022. What is it like for you to step onto that stage as a Latina right now?
I think the word *Latina* carries the biggest weight. Everything I have done this past year has made me feel the weight of showing up for my community, of expressing what I feel. There's a frustration to feeling powerless because you feel like you can't do much. At least, through music and art, non-Latinos in the U.S. have understood the immense pain that's happening here.

***Latina*, *immigrant*, and *Colombiana* are polarizing, divisive words lately. Do you feel pressure to defend the community in a more aggressive way than you have in the past?**
More than pressure..... I feel like I want to make sure that what I do has an impact. I don't just want to say "ICE out" and for nothing to happen.

***Will* you say "ICE out?"**
I'm probably going to go a little harder than that. I want to simply represent my community. But what I'm telling you is that, as a human being, I want that to mean more. I'm not saying that I'm not going to do it; what I'm saying is that I would do it and will do it with my soul. But I want to sit down and understand, in my head: *Here's what that meant.*

You understand the power of your words. So are you willing to say it?
I know my team would kill me, but I'm willing to say it. If I'm being honest with you, it's something that crosses the line of what I have to do to protect myself. But at the end of the day, what is my role if I'm in this position?

Are we asking too much from Latino artists right now? Because we are asking you to be global artists but also activists, to have a universal message but also a political one. Is it fair to ask you to be all these things?
At the Grammys in 2025, I manifested that I wanted to talk. I told myself 70 times, "I want to say something, I want to say something, I want to say something," and then, "But you can't say it, you can't say it, you can't say it."

Who says you can't say things?
A lot of people. People will say, "It's better you don't." Why? Because if you say the thing, maybe the next day you'll get a call: "Hey, we are taking your visa away." You become bait, because some people want to show their power.

But I have a huge stage, and that's why I want to wait, and if someone was ever to do something to me, I want to stand firmly on my stage for my community. So that's why I may have to be more careful, and wait for my turn, and ensure that, through that opportunity, I can talk and represent something more. So that it doesn't turn into something that doesn't achieve absolutely anything. That's why I go back to the same thing: What impact does it really have to

(continued on page 103)

THIS PAGE: JERSEY BY SUPREME. BACK COVER: PLAYBOY SHORTS BY MISSGUIDED.

“The more successful I become, the more misunderstood I am.”

(continued from page 99)

say “ICE out” versus something else that can have a real impact on my community?

What do you want people to feel when you’re singing on that stage?
When people see anything related to Karol G, I want them to think to themselves, *I can do that*. Social media sells you perfection, but the process itself—of how you get there—never exists there. It’s as if everyone just becomes a millionaire, or everyone just has a great life.

I want people to see reality in me. In fact, last year was one where life threw me to the floor, kicked me, pushed me, stood on me, spun me around. You know, a couple of months ago, as I was designing the show—the narrative, everything I want to do or say on stage—I realized that I was drawing inspiration from the book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, which I read about six years ago. The essence of the book is that it helps you find your inner wild woman.

Do you feel like a wild woman?
Yes, I do. I feel like a wild woman. You know, after all of last year’s hardships, I needed to cancel everything and leave. I told my team I needed to stop. I needed to understand why everything that was happening to me was happening. So I went to Hawaii for a month.

You chopped off your hair then, right?
That’s what happened. When you chop off your hair, the first thing people say is “She lost it!” But maybe I was letting my wild Carolina do what she wanted to do. Maybe it meant regaining a little bit of control over myself, over my decisions, over the way I think without having an answer. It was my decision, and no one was giving me their opinion. I feel like the reason we are here is to evolve the soul, and to have had that opportunity to analyze myself—to judge myself and criticize myself, to understand why things were happening to me—has allowed me to move forward. I think people will start to notice that in everything I’m doing. Because I’m happy doing music, I’m super inspired in the studio. I’m letting go of everything. I’m single and, to be honest, I’ve always thought that my most evolutionary moments are when I’m alone. As a good Latina from a traditional family, they teach you to give yourself fully to relationships, to a point where you can even lose yourself.

Now that you’re single, have you learned something about love that you didn’t know before?
Yes. I think you have to work a lot on yourself so the relationship can work. You also have to

HAIR: BOB RECINE. MAKEUP: JAMAL SCOTT. SET DESIGN: HAPPY MASSEE. MANICURE: KIM TRUONG. PRODUCTION: CONNECT THE DOTS.

do the work so that you can walk away when you recognize it's not going to work. When I finished my last relationship, I initially felt like, *Wow, I'm here again.* But then I saw it as, *Wow, how beautiful that I had the courage to say that I no longer wanted to be there.*

Have you felt that pressure to have that traditional Latina life?
Of course. In my case, people think I'm already behind. According to my culture, I should have kids by now. But you know what? This year has literally been like, *Fuck it.* I don't feel like I'm behind. I actually feel that it's beautiful that I'm living my process, that I'm evolving, that I'm learning, that I'm not tired of experimenting, that I'm curious.

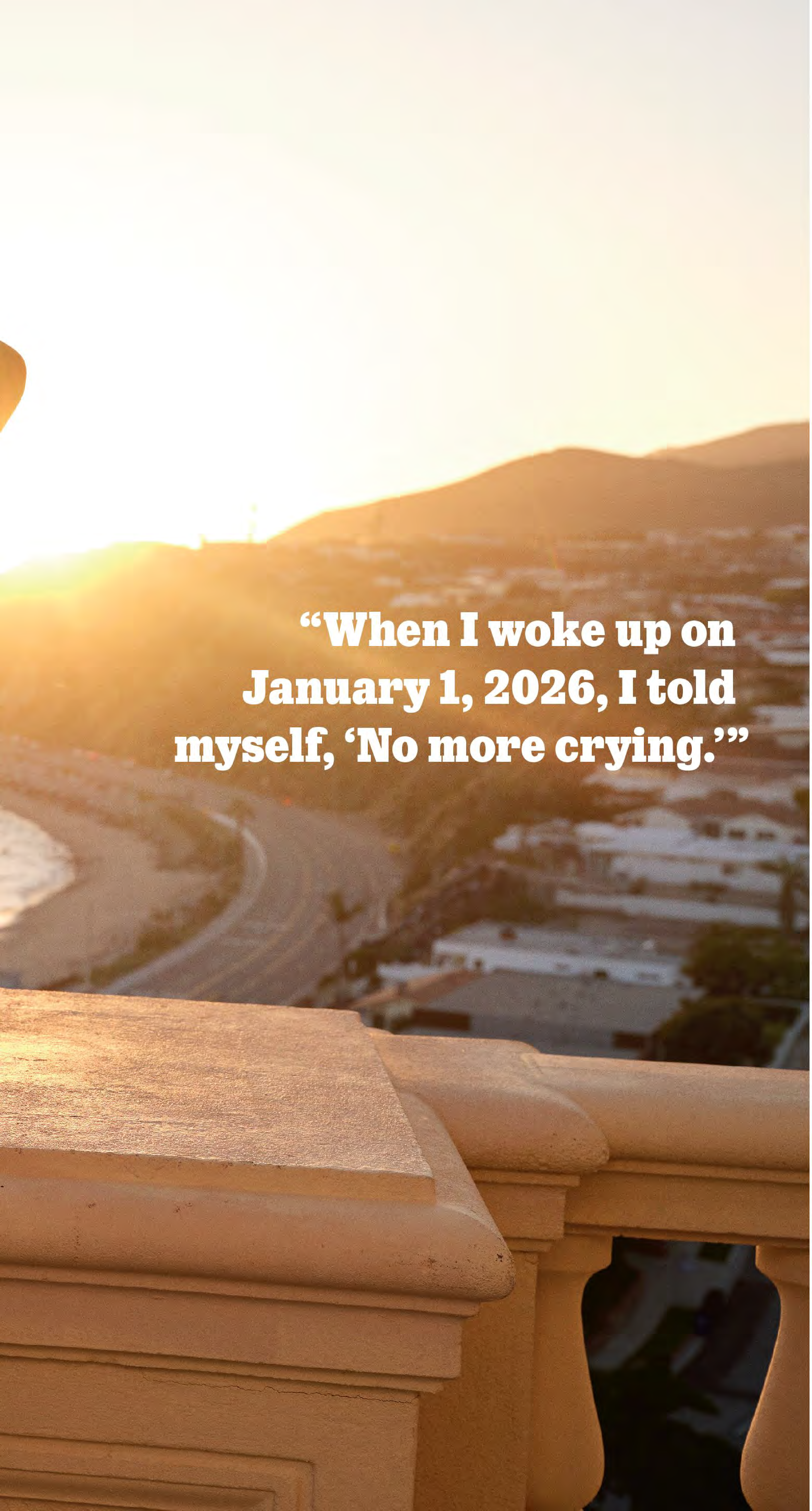
I want to talk about your *Playboy* cover. Your critics say you're too sexual. Others will see a *bichota* [a play on a Puerto Rican slang term she repurposed to mean "boss lady"]. Why did you decide to appear on the cover of *Playboy*?
I had the two Carolinas telling me what to do: "You should do it." "You shouldn't do it."

I questioned if it was the "convenient" thing to do. That's how I arrived to the question I needed in order to say "fuck it." It's not about what is convenient; it's about what I would do.

I love powerful women who show their power through their bodies. That's one of the reasons why I did the *Tropicoqueta* visuals, because of the *vedettes* [cabaret dancers.] In past times, people saw the sexiness of vedettes as stupid. They saw them just as entertainment, but for the vedettes—during an era where they didn't even have a voice—to be able to go on a stage and express their pain, their anger, their passion, their love through their bodies…became their art. So I see how people see it one way, but I see it another way.

The only person I asked if I should do it or not was Sofía Vergara. I called her and told her, "If you tell me not to do it, I won't."

What did she tell you?
"Mijita, with *that* body? When you get to this age, you tell yourself, 'Fuck, why didn't I pose that one time? I should have posed more with a thong!' Just one thing: Don't show your



“When I woke up on January 1, 2026, I told myself, ‘No more crying.’”

pussy!” She also said, “This moment will have a reason. What is going to be your reason?”

The truth is, my reason is a little bit about doing what I want to do; at the same time it’s a little bit about being rebellious, but not unjustified rebellion. I feel like you become what others say about you. There’s always a different rumor about me: People have impregnated me, they’ve killed me, they’ve divided me in political parties.… In the end, you can’t waste your time denying everything.

So I kind of want people to push me out of that “perfect woman/good girl” box, because I’m not perfect, and it’s not that I’m either good or bad. I am…human.

And humans *are* imperfect.

Beyond that, we are different. And so why do I want to do this? Because I want to. Because I grew up inspired by how beautiful the women in the magazine looked, and now I have the opportunity to be that beautiful, sexy *mamasota* in the magazine. Why not?

Have you ever just told people who ask you these types of questions: “I do it because I want to”?

No.… I think maybe yesterday was the first time. I think we were talking about something, and I said, “Fuck it.”

What makes you feel the sexiest?

That it’s my decision to be there. That’s what I was thinking the entire time I was doing the photo shoot.

Does it bother you if men sexualize you?

No. It’s going to happen either way. I swear, people will try and destroy everything you do. I was singing at the Vatican, and the next day people were destroying me. If I dress up as a nun, people will see it as sexual.

But part of your magic is that you have empowered that sexuality and femininity.

This may sound super cliché, but it’s my reality because I live it and feel it constantly: Women have a superpower that men don’t have. The same way that we give birth and have children, spiritually we have something that men don’t have. And the system isn’t ready for that. So when it sees a powerful woman, it completely turns around its own narratives. I feel like that’s what’s happened to me. The more successful I become, the more misunderstood I am. The only thing I’ve tried to do is inspire my followers and celebrate my successes, because I’m the only one who knows how much it has cost me.

This interview was conducted in Spanish and translated and edited for clarity.

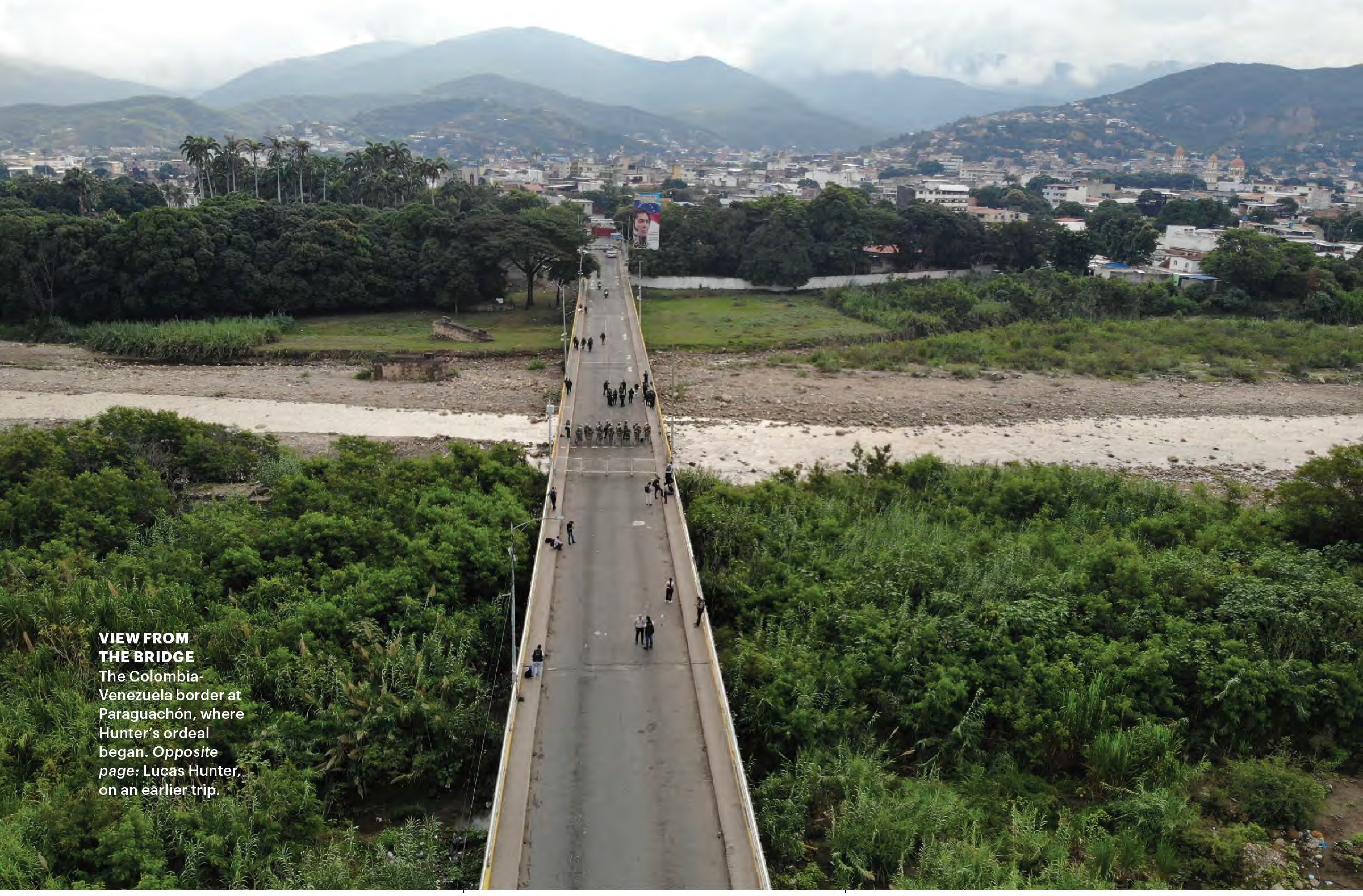
VANI

On vacation near the Venezuelan border, Lucas Hunter went out for a ride. He didn’t come back for 192 days. Welcome to the new age of state-sanctioned kidnapping, where your passport could get you disappeared.

BY SEAN WILLIAMS

SHED

HOSTAGE CITY Caracas, capital of a nation that turned kidnapping into foreign policy



VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE The Colombia-Venezuela border at Paraguachón, where Hunter's ordeal began. *Opposite page:* Lucas Hunter, on an earlier trip.

AT AROUND 10 A.M. ON JANUARY 7 last year, Lucas Hunter stood in the busy Colombian border town of Paraguachón when a man in military fatigues looked him dead in the eyes and said something his schoolboy Spanish made out as "Come with us." Hunter glanced at the familiar red, yellow, and blue stripes on the man's shoulder and assumed he was Colombian.

Hunter was no flyweight: 36 years old, six feet tall, with a frame that suggested an ability in darker arts than the kitesurfing he'd spent a week and a half doing along the Guajira Peninsula, one of the best places on earth for the sport. The soldier was short, with a belly like a cannonball. He approached Hunter and grabbed his arm. Could Hunter punch the guy? Scream for help? Hunter's moped was parked a few yards back, and he was holding its key in his hand. Could he slip free and scamper over to it, light up its engine, and speed away?

Hunter would pore over these thoughts for weeks, replaying them like a video umpire, wondering each time whether he could've done something differently, as he sank deeper into the guts of one of the world's worst gulag archipelagos. But when Hunter pulled his arm away and the soldier grabbed him again, only harder, Hunter spotted the pistol holstered on his belt. Then time seemed to accelerate, and there were suddenly more of them—military, but also immigration and plainclothes guys dressed in shirts and jeans like vaqueros, or gangsters—and they swarmed around Hunter and dragged him past a white-painted roadblock and a sign that read FELIZ VIAJE Y PRONTO RETORNO. Hunter yelled, "No entra, no entra!" which was his way of pleading that he wasn't a spy or a narco, just a gringo tourist. No one intervened. As the mob dragged him across the border and shoved him into a roadside shipping container, Hunter caught one last detail. That flag: white stars on blue. Venezuelan. The door slammed shut. It was hot inside. And he was theirs.

Most folks are as dialed in to real danger as krill in a blue whale's mouth: Hundreds continued making merry on the *Titanic* even as their cabins were pointed halfway to the moon. Lucas Hunter would not have been among them. He was a man of odds and probabilities, whose London finance job hung on knowing the risks underpinning the global economy. So when one of the soldiers rifled through Hunter's backpack and, after setting his French passport down, noticed there was another passport, an American one—which sent his eyes spinning like cherries on a slot machine as he drew an *X* with his hand—Hunter immediately recalled the stories he'd heard as a kid about his Jewish Hungarian great-grandparents: how some of them had survived the Nazis, and some of them hadn't.

And he knew, right there and then.

I'm in danger.

LUCAS HUNTER HADN'T WANDERED INTO VENEZUELA for an adventure. He hadn't motorcycled there by accident, or snuck in to meet a woman he'd dated online. He'd planned an itinerary through Colombia—first with his younger sister Sophie, then, when she was grounded because of illness, alone—guaranteeing the best surf, and the least potential trouble. He'd checked travel advisories and carried both his passports, just in case. In many ways, he was a model tourist.

It didn't matter. Riding around the peninsula was like stepping through quicksand: Any moment, Hunter could be pulled into something way too powerful for him to control. That week, Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's pugilistic dictator, was celebrating his third presidential inauguration by locking up thousands who protested an election almost the entire world called a fraud. U.S. president Joe Biden was among them, after spending the second half of 2024 slapping sanctions on Maduro's regime. Biden's successor, Donald Trump, had once said it would be "cool" to invade Venezuela, and he openly weighed Maduro's arrest. So the many agencies that make up Venezuela's military-intelligence complex rounded up *yanquis* (Yankees) and other foreigners, some of whom they claimed were CIA stooges, but others, it seemed, simply to use as bargaining chips in a rapidly expanding policy of hostage diplomacy—one growing commonplace among autocracies keen to get a leg up over richer and more powerful enemies. (A year later, long after Hunter's disappearance, the U.S. would engage its own version of this policy, attacking military positions across Caracas to extract Maduro himself into detention.) Rumor had it that Venezuelan authorities offered bounties of anywhere between $30,000 and $70,000 to bring U.S. citizens into custody—a huge sum for a place where cops often earn just a few thousand dollars per year—deputizing swaths of the nation as potential kidnappers.

Which might be why men from at least four agencies, including the Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, or SEBIN, Venezuela's feared secret police, interrogated Hunter in the shipping container via a phone translation app. After four hours, Hunter asked if he could tether to one of the officers' cell networks to talk to his mom. The officer agreed. Hunter opened WhatsApp and recorded a voice note for Sophie. "Caught by the Venezuelans," he told her in clipped, plaintive French. "I think they want to let me go, but I have the police, the military, that are asking me lots of questions, and I think I'll get to the end of things. Lucas."

"I could tell that he was scared," says Sophie, a UN consultant based in Geneva. They were the tightest pair among the four Hunter siblings, and their conversations often took on a goofy tenor. This was different. She tried calling Lucas back: no response. "I didn't know the full picture," she adds, "but I knew it was bad." She wouldn't hear from her brother again for five months.

Venezuela's military-intelligence complex rounded up *yanquis* to use as bargaining chips in a rapidly expanding policy of hostage diplomacy.

The guards moved Hunter to a small barracks beside the container and sat him at a desk.

Late that evening, one of them shackled his hands, threw a hood over his head, and pulled him out the barracks door and into the backseat of a 4×4, wedging him between two men. The vehicle hurtled through the night on slipshod roads until it reached a parking lot in Maracaibo, Venezuela's second city. The guards dragged him out and down through a door into a small basement cell. They pulled off his hood and shone a lamp in his eyes. Hunter squinted in the light. To one side, he could make out the silhouette of a camera, its lens pointed directly at him.

This is how the interrogations began. Sometimes, they'd last a couple of hours; others almost a day, raking over the same, tiny details, trying to catch him in lies so small a gnat couldn't squeeze through. Teams switched out, each wearing different insignia, seeming to compete for the best version of his story, the one that would best cast him as a *mercenario*, or a yanqui spy. Each session ended with a broken promise. "Just a few questions, then we'll release you," they told him at first. "A few more hours and you're free. We'll book you in here, make sure everything is fine, then you can go." *Mañana*. It didn't mean "tomorrow," but more "whenever." The word alone would be enough to turn Hunter's stomach.

At around 4 a.m. on January 25, when a short, fat guard opened the cell door and motioned for Hunter to pack his things, he hoped that, finally, mañana had arrived. It hadn't. The guard looked at Hunter and said, in English, "You are going to Caracas."

Another team was waiting for Hunter at ground level. They threw a bulletproof vest over his neck and cuffed his hands and feet. Then they frog-marched him out into the wet heat of pre-dawn Maracaibo, toward a pair of black Toyota all-roaders. It was dark, and they seemed intent on filming the moment like it was a scene in a Michael Mann movie; "really theatrical," Hunter recalls, and "funny… I think we had to do it four times over because the angle wasn't right." Then they pushed him onto one of the Toyotas' back seats, climbed in, and hurtled off, speeding along empty ocean highways, flying through red lights and two-horse towns. For 12 hours they went, through dawn and day, stopping first for fuel, then at a near-empty fried chicken store before driving past glistening coasts and palm-topped sierras. Then they drove inland, past jungle and a gigantic power station, before the palms were replaced by seas of cinder block shanties that clung to hills like discarded stacks of LEGO, and they were no longer in the gorgeous, bucolic Venezuela, the one conquistadors believed to be the home of El Dorado. They were in Caracas.

It was dusk when the convoy stopped outside an ugly, gray 16-story block in the city's downtown, a building designed in 2005 as the home of the Caracas Metro but later sequestered as the headquarters of the SEBIN. Locals knew it as La Tumba, the Tomb. A fresh round of interrogations began, more organized, with

THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF LUCAS HUNTER. OPPOSITE: SCHNEYDER MENDOZA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES. OPENING PAGES: BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

a human translator and a polygraph. Agents shone flashlights into Hunter's eyes and kicked the back of his chair when they didn't like an answer. Hunter hadn't slept for two days, nor eaten since the roadside chicken. Sweat poured from beneath the bulletproof vest, and his ankles throbbed in their shackles. "I'm done," he snapped. "I'm not saying anything unless I see someone from the French consulate."

The agent barely looked up. "This is just procedure," he said.

It was late evening when they'd had enough, when they pulled him back into one of the Toyotas and drove a couple of miles across Caracas, and instead of commercial buildings, all Hunter could see were waves of slums and projects that roiled up and down hills, and they arrived minutes later at the foot of a strange concrete building that rose from the barrios like a giant, space-age spinnaker, surrounded by tactical vehicles and gun-toting cops.

This was El Helicoide, the Helix. Like La Tumba, it told a story of Venezuela's descent into turmoil. It would also be Hunter's home for the next five months.

The building looked "pretty awful," Hunter recalls, when he became its latest foreign resident on February 21, "bustling with cops everywhere and people with guns." Cops strip-searched him, removed the laces from his shoes, and made him wear blue pajamas. Now he looked like any other crook. It was the most hopeless he'd felt since the capture.

A guard placed Hunter in a device known as a *polpo*, or octopus, shackling his hands on either side of a seat belt–like band around his waist. Another round of interrogations. By 2 a.m., when they wrapped up, he could barely think.

EVEN LATIN AMERICA'S GREAT LIBERTADOR resorted to hostage diplomacy. On August 16, 1812, while marching on the city of Puerto Cabello, Simón Bolívar took Spanish commander Antonio Zuazola captive, then offered him to colonial leader Juan Domingo de Monteverde in exchange for one of his own men. Monteverde refused, so Bolívar's men hanged Zuazola from the decks of the city's fortress.

Bolívar marched into Caracas a year later and, in 1819, established Gran Colombia, a nation that existed barely a decade before dissolving into Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. (All three modern states kept their predecessor's red, blue, and yellow tricolor, with subtle differences—thus Hunter's confusion in Paraguachón.)

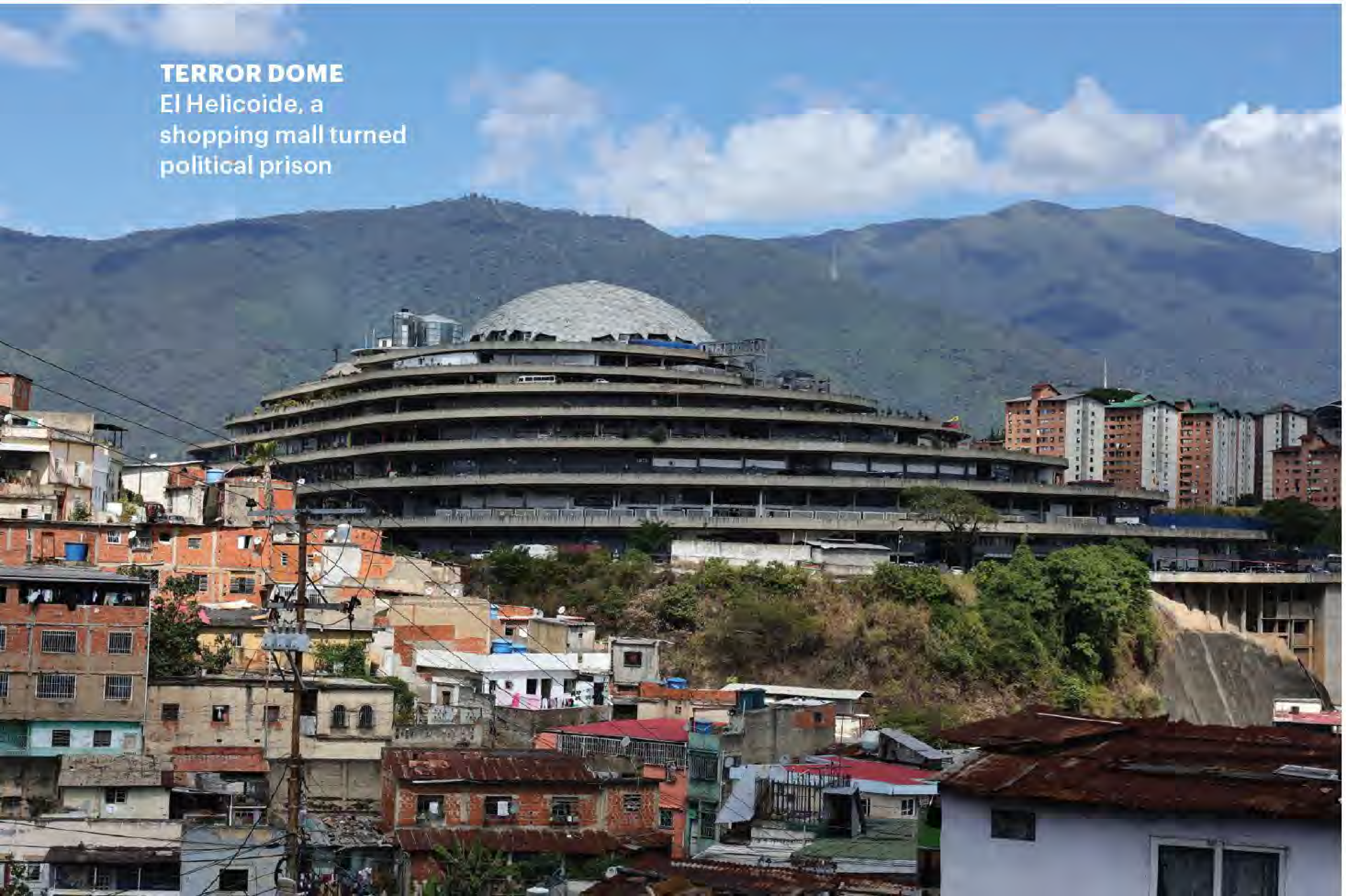
For the next century, Venezuela subsisted on coffee, cocoa, and leather. But in 1914 a derrick at the Zumaque I oil field, near Maracaibo, began gushing. By 1928 Venezuela was the world's leading exporter of petroleum, with more proven reserves than Saudi Arabia. But by 1999, decades of corruption had convinced Venezuela's people to elect Hugo Chávez, a barrel-bodied and rictus-grinned military officer who'd already tried and failed once to seize the nation in a coup d'état.

"He probably just smells my dog."

The new president promised a nation for the people. He purged corrupt officials and nationalized industry, and named Simón Bolívar Venezuela's patron saint. Oil riches carried his ambitious welfare plans. But Chávez's system, which the journalist William Neuman dubbed "showcialismo," soon resembled a monarchy, with state functions dished out to inept apparatchiks who tanked the nation's economy. Between 2013—when Chávez died of cancer and was followed by Nicolás Maduro, a loyal Chavista—and 2019, almost two-thirds of Venezuela's economy vanished. Inflation topped out at 130,000 percent in 2018, compounded by sanctions imposed by the first Trump administration. Gangs proliferated, and millions of Venezuelans fled abroad in what has become Latin America's largest-ever exodus.

Those criticizing La Revolución Bolivariana often wound up at El Helicoide, a 786,000-square-foot pyramidal stack of floors, topped with a geodesic dome, which was first conceived in 1955 as a futuristic shopping center and a symbol of Venezuela's petrostate sophistication. But the project was never completed, and from the 1980s it became a home for domestic intelligence agencies whose message to the people was clear: Try us and this could be your grave.

Maduro didn't have Chávez's charisma, and he responded to Venezuela's economic crisis, in part, by extending Simón Bolívar's program of hostage diplomacy, kidnapping fleets of foreign nationals to bring their governments to heel—or at least to the negotiating table.



TERROR DOME
El Helicoide, a shopping mall turned political prison

SEBIN
PATRULLAJE ESTRATEGICO

SECRET POLICE
SEBIN agents outside
El Helicoide

JESUS VARGAS/GETTY IMAGES (2)

Hostage diplomacy "has somehow become a central tool of modern statecraft, a mechanism for nuclear powers to inflict pain on one another without tipping into war," write Drew Hinshaw and Joe Parkinson in their book *Swap: A Secret History of the New Cold War*, which focuses on U.S. citizens detained in Russia. But nations all over the world, from Iran to North Korea, Afghanistan, China, and Turkey, have increased their use of the tactic.

"It works," says Phil Gunson, a Caracas-based analyst for the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based NGO. "Because it's a way of applying the pressure via public opinion on…rival governments to do your bidding."

In 2020 a botched U.S. mercenary operation to topple Maduro and install his rival Juan Guaidó prompted Maduro to swell the populations of El Helicoide and other facilities with foreigners as well as Venezuelans: The NGO Foro Penal reported that Venezuela held 421 "political detainees" that year. In 2023 Biden appeared to play ball with Caracas by agreeing to release Maduro ally and convicted money launderer Alex Saab for dozens of foreign prisoners. Hostage diplomacy "works even better," says Gunson, "if the U.S. openly engages in trading hostages."

At first, it seemed as if Trump would continue playing ball in his second term. On January 31, 2025, Trump's special envoy Richard Grenell met Maduro at Caracas's Miraflores Palace and returned with two things: a promise from Maduro to accept Venezuelan migrants from the U.S. and the release of six American detainees. "Just been informed that we are bringing six hostages home from Venezuela," Trump posted to Truth Social. "Thank you to Ric Grenell and my entire staff. Great job!"

One of those who came home was David Estrella, a 62-year-old New Yorker whose family had employed the services of Global Reach, a D.C.-based nonprofit lobbying for American citizens held overseas. The day before, a U.S. government official had told Sophie Hunter to contact Eric Lebson, chief strategy officer at Global Reach. Sophie, a multilateral climate and trade expert, was a natural choice to lead the family's fight to bring her brother home. But with relatives in France and the U.S., she struggled to get everybody pulling in the same direction. When she engaged Global Reach, she says, "all the chaos that was happening prior got funneled into a process and a strategy.… We knew we were with people who understood what was going on and who were committed to bringing Lucas home."

Lebson, a former Pentagon official, was close with staff at SPEHA, the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs. The U.S. State Department knew that nine Americans were held at Rodeo One, a site outside Caracas known to hold political captives. But nobody knew where Hunter was. "Not knowing was the real terror," says Sophie. She read articles about people who had suffered terribly at the hands of the SEBIN, the agency that Lebson's contacts inside Venezuela told him were most likely holding her brother. And she fretted that he could suffer a flare-up of the asthma he'd suffered since childhood.

But finding Hunter wasn't Global Reach's biggest challenge. "There's so much anguish and conflict in the world," says Lebson. "Why should I stop and take a second out of my day to care about this guy?" If the public, and the government, believed Hunter had ventured into Venezuela on a kitesurfing jolly, Lebson adds, they might think: "I don't care. He got what he deserved."

That April, Global Reach helped secure the release of Ksenia Karelina, a Russian American detained in Moscow during a family visit. Global Reach decided to foreground a detail about Karelina that it believed would best capture Americans' sympathies: She was a keen amateur ballerina. It worked. The team followed a similar blueprint with Hunter. "In reality," says Lebson, Hunter was "a serious finance guy who works in London and international markets. But we needed to find a way to get people to care."

Global Reach decided that to best grab the attention of the American public—and the Trump administration—Hunter would be the Kitesurfer. Furthermore, Lebson says, "our narrative had to explain: This is a smart guy. He never went to Venezuela. He did his research. He steered clear. He was in Colombia.… And that's where we brought up the *K* word: *kidnapped*."

The first time Hunter suspected somebody was looking for him wasn't until the end of February, several weeks into the ordeal, when guards hooked his cellphone up to a Wi-Fi network and he found a WhatsApp message in French from somebody he guessed was at the French embassy in Caracas. (The U.S. had not had a diplomatic presence in Venezuela since 2010; its closest embassy is in Bogotá, Colombia.) But over days of brutal interrogations at El Helicoide, the only screen he could see clearly was one in the corner of his interrogation room that beamed CCTV footage of a filthy prison cell occupied by an emaciated man with a Robinson Crusoe beard. It looked like hell. On day six, the guards marched Hunter around the building to a separate entrance, booked him in, and showed him his new home. It was the cell from the CCTV. The wild-haired man was an Argentine named Gustavo. There was mold on the wall and a bucket for a toilet. Hunter's bed was a rotten mattress with springs poking through the fabric. Sometimes there was drinking water; sometimes there wasn't. Blackouts threw the building into frequent darkness, broken only by the lights of the shanties outside, which shimmered like dull votive candles. The heat outside boiled the building like a pot, luring mosquitoes to feast on its inhabitants. Hunter's hands stayed bound, and they were in near-constant pain.

Hunter called it "the Cage." To survive, he had to retrain his mind. "I've seen different reactions," he says. "One is total numbness—like mentally, clinically depressed. And then you don't do anything. Another one is to be super angry, and that obviously tends to lead to adverse outcomes."

But there was a third way. Hunter's father was Protestant and his mother Catholic, and he'd attended an all-boys Catholic school in Paris. He hadn't thought much about religion since. At first, when other inmates recited the rosary in Spanish, he'd try to say it with them. Initially, he says, "it was just a way to connect with other people." But through religion, Hunter discovered a form of acceptance. It slowed him down, calmed him. He ate slowly and slept half the day. "God has a plan," he would repeat, however drunk that plan might seem. "There must be a purpose to this." When a guard asked if he wanted to watch something on a device, Hunter asked for French prayers on YouTube. He would sing hymns with the inmates and break what little bread they had together. "I don't think I could find any other way to just go through that without going crazy," he says. "That was the only way."

Three weeks passed; he visited the yard only twice. By that time, he was cut from the mattress springs, and his hands bled from the cuffs. The food had turned his stomach. He had coughing fits and diarrhea. When a guard took him to see a doctor, he broke down in front of the man and pleaded for him to remove the handcuffs, just for a moment. "You made an oath," Hunter cried. "You're a doctor."

The doctor refused. Later that day Hunter was transferred to El Helicoide's maximum security wing. It was clean, but it didn't have windows or bars on the door. It was just a box. Hunter shared the cell with a Venezuelan man who flew into bouts of wild paranoia, spending entire nights talking to himself, and Hunter had no way to block out the sound but to dissociate entirely. What if, by doing so, Hunter would lose his mind completely by the time he got out? The thought terrified him.

Hunter took some solace from conversations with his fellow detainees, many of whom were members of Venezuela's political opposition. One of them was a lawmaker named Alfredo Díaz, a state governor that the SEBIN had disappeared the previous November. Díaz had "good energy," Hunter recalls. "He'd be the one saying, 'You'll be out soon. Don't worry. The Trump guys are working on your case.'"

DÍAZ WAS RIGHT. On May 20, Ric Grenell secured the release of another American prisoner in Venezuela, an Air Force veteran named Joseph St. Clair. Sophie launched a website and social media pages for her brother and called Global Reach more than daily. Occasionally they would prepare for media interviews or government meetings. "Sometimes I would just call them because I was scared for Lucas and wanted to talk," she says. "They never said no." Sophie visited Washington on several occasions, meeting with congresspeople and penning op-eds. Around the same time, Lebson and his team, using a web of informants inside Venezuela, finally discovered that Lucas was at El Helicoide. But the relief of knowing where he was quickly turned to fear. "We didn't know if the U.S. government knew that he was not at Rodeo One, and we feared they might get those guys released and leave Lucas behind," says Sophie. She hit the phone, desperate to reach Grenell. In June, Tim Hunter, Lucas and Sophie's brother, who was based in the U.S., produced a 15-second television commercial featuring their great aunt Susie to air in the D.C. area. Holding a portrait of Lucas, Susie addressed President Trump: "Thank you for already bringing seven Americans home from Venezuela," she said. "Please bring Lucas home safe. I know you're the only one who can."

"Hostage diplomacy works even better if the U.S. openly engages in trading hostages."

Susie Hunter isn't sure why she was chosen to front the ad. "Maybe because I'm old," she jokes. Whatever the reason, Susie's Southern charm appeared to work. On the second day the ad ran, a senior U.S. official called Tim Hunter. "President Trump saw the ad," he told Tim. "I want you to know we have Lucas on our radar."

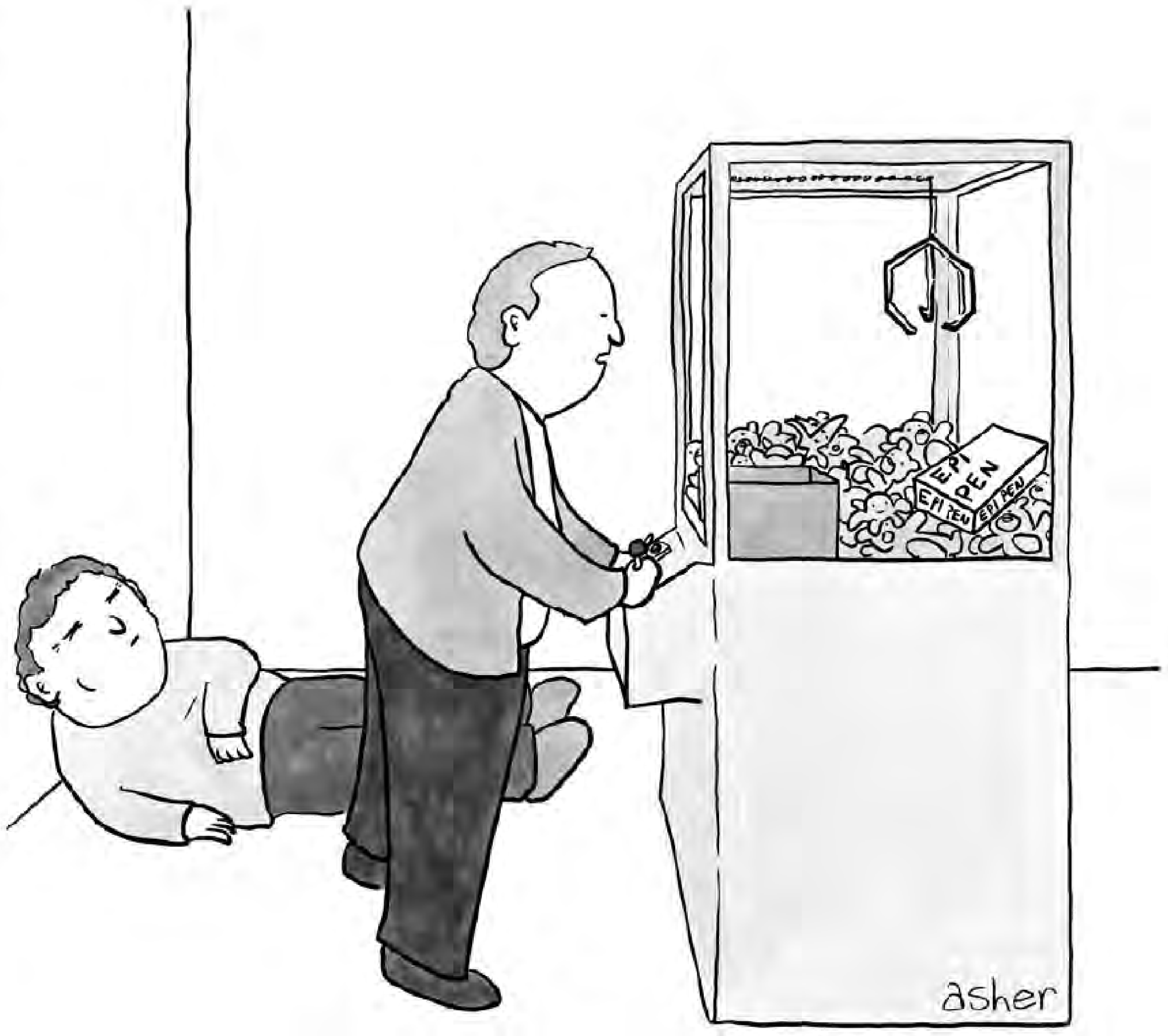
The week before Hunter's release was among the worst of his 192 days of captivity. A credible tip that he'd be released came and went, and workers began painting the walls in abrasive gray paint that ripped off any skin that rubbed against it. The paint fumes made the prisoners sick, and yard time vanished. The guards grew more aggressive and cruel: They would barge into cells for spot checks precisely when the prisoners were going to sleep. Amid the construction, even more cameras were installed—in cells and even in toilets.

On July 18, when guards burst into his cell, Hunter assumed it was for another round of harassment. But this time, they were flanked by the prison warden. He turned on the light and kicked Hunter's mattress. What he said was in Spanish, but Hunter could make out two words: *médico* (doctor) and *cosas* (things). "I figured, OK, I have to take my things and go see the médico for some reason."

But his cellmate woke up. "Dude," the cellmate said in Spanish. "That's it. You're free."

The guards walked Hunter outside, cuffed his hands behind his back, threw a hood over his head, and put him in a car. Then they drove away. And for the first time in five months, Lucas Hunter wasn't in El Helicoide anymore.

Fifteen minutes later, the agents ushered him into a room with a camera and handed him a statement. It was a confession, of sorts, declaring that Hunter acknowledged he'd broken the laws of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, that he was treated fairly, and that he promised not to sue. Then they sat him out-



"Come on, baby..."

side, and after a while he felt it before he saw it: movement, people lining up beside him, all of them in blue pajamas, like him. He wondered if they were also gringos, but he'd long since trained his mind not to react to slivers of hope.

There again, Hunter was sure he heard somebody say "aeropuerto." Then everybody got into cars and drove across the city, and soon they were on the tarmac, facing a small jet. There were officials shaking their hands, and everybody was smiling. Some of them wore cowboy hats, and Hunter finally figured that he was in the company of Americans, that he was going home. They headed into a room where somebody gave them a change of clothes and little plastic U.S. flags, and they waved them, and people took pictures, and everybody smiled. The chargé d'affaires from the embassy in Bogotá explained what would happen next, that they'd fly to San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, to meet President Nayib Bukele, whose colossal prison, the Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo, or CECOT, would release 252 Venezuelans as part of the deal. There'd be a brief media appearance. Then they'd head to a U.S. Air Force base in San Antonio for debriefing and medical evaluations. And then, when they felt ready, they would be free.

THE EXCHANGE
Hunter (second from right) at a handoff ceremony in San Salvador, before the flight to freedom

COURTESY OF THE PRESIDENCY OF EL SALVADOR

The group touched down in San Salvador, met Bukele, then left. While they were in the air, a State Department official handed Hunter his phone. Sophie was on the line. "I'm in the air," he told her. "We're going to Texas."

"You're safe," she replied. "Trust the people around you. Susie is on her way to Texas already, and I'm coming tomorrow."

BY THE TIME LUCAS HUNTER was released, U.S. officials were deep into a plot to overthrow Nicolás Maduro. At 10:46 p.m. on January 2 this year, President Trump told his forces to launch Operation Absolute Resolve, which, having dispatched 150 jets from 20 air bases to bomb positions across northern Venezuela, breached Maduro's compound at 2 a.m. the next day and captured the Venezuelan leader and his wife, Cecilia, as they attempted to hide in a safe room. Maduro is now in detention in Brooklyn, awaiting trial for a host of drugs and weapons charges, maintaining that he is not a defendant but a prisoner of war. Trump has promised to "run" Venezuela via Maduro's successor, Delcy Rodríguez. The CIA now has operatives all over the country, and Trump has threatened more violence if Rodríguez does not comply with his pledge to extract Venezuelan oil.

Venezuela has since released a number of U.S. citizens from detention. But White House officials will not confirm their identities, or whether more remain in Venezuelan custody. And according to Foro Penal, Caracas still holds about 750 political prisoners. The release of Hunter and his cohort may have closed one chapter on hostage diplomacy. But the persistence of Chavista rule despite Maduro's absence suggests that the policy will continue to flourish—even if it doesn't target Americans.

Few of the stories involving those released since January 31 are as straightforward as Lucas Hunter's. A surprising number of the detainees were former or current members of the U.S. Armed Forces. One of the 10 Americans released alongside Hunter was Dahud Hanid Ortiz, a 19-year U.S. Army veteran and convicted murderer who in 2016 stabbed three people to death in a Madrid law office. Ortiz had gone there intending to kill a lawyer, Víctor Joel Salas, who was not present; he killed two employees and a client instead. Some accounts suggest Maduro's government added Ortiz to the exchange at the last minute; others say U.S. negotiators prioritized the optics of releasing a larger number of Americans. Either way, having already served part of his sentence in Venezuela's Rodeo One prison, Ortiz is now a free man, and officials acknowledge that the triple murderer is somewhere in the United States. "Ortiz was never a political prisoner; he was a murderer who was convicted and sentenced by the Venezuelan authorities," Salas says. "The case record makes it quite clear that he's a criminal."

SOPHIE ARRIVED the evening after Hunter's return and met him the next morning. They hugged.

"Thank you for coming to rescue me," he said.

"I'm here for you," she told him. "And we'll stay for as long as you need."

It was tough to adapt to life outside El Helicoide. Authorities gave him $1,000 to spend on clothes, but Hunter could pick out only items in the same blue as his prison pajamas. And his feet blistered after attempting a jog. He struggled to snap out of the apathy that had helped him survive his captivity. People expected him to suddenly live in the moment, to live like there was no tomorrow. He couldn't relate. "I don't feel that I enjoy life more than before," he says. It's "very disappointing."

The longest conversation Hunter had in San Antonio was with the base's chaplain. "I've been in touch with God for all those months," he began. "But somehow, since my release, He's nowhere to be found. The connection is cut." Even praying felt strange. They spoke for hours. The chaplain handed Hunter a copy of *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. It helped. Now he has a French Bible on his bedside table. Slowly, he's getting back into it.

Sometimes Hunter dreams he's in prison. It's not a terrible dream; it's just strange. He doesn't feel any animosity toward his captors. "They had orders, and they wanted to get more bargaining chips," he says. "And for them, one of the strategies was hostage diplomacy. And I was a good candidate. So nothing personal here. It's just the way geopolitics goes." He started back at work in October, and he feels like he's ready for a relationship, ready for a family, for professional success, "to build something meaningful." Travel for travel's sake doesn't sound like fun anymore. In December, Alfredo Díaz, the opposition figure Hunter had befriended at El Helicoide, died in custody, at age 56. The news upset Hunter. But it also helped put his ordeal in context.

"There are some terrible days. Sometimes, especially after a terrible day, I realize, *Well, at least I'm getting food and drinkable water. Isn't that awesome?*"

New

Reality

America watched **Taylor Hale** win *Big Brother*. As Miss March, she's rewriting the story.

BY TAYLOR HALE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KANYA IWANA

I SAID YES TO LIVING INSIDE A HOUSE where cameras watched me 24 hours a day. Microphones dangled above my head as I slept while I was being observed in real time by strangers. The stakes were high; there was the potential of a life-altering cash prize. There was also the looming possibility that me being the first Black woman to win *Big Brother* would make history—all at a particularly fraught time in our country's understanding of race and equity.

Inside the *Big Brother* house in 2022, I understood that I was being watched. It was explicit and contractual. But even there, the psychological boundaries of consent were more fraught than they appeared. There's a difference between agreeing to be observed and being consumed. Even worse, the possibility—especially for the women in the house—that we would be reduced to just our bodies.

As such, there are corners of the internet where fragments of my naked body exist. They were clipped from live feeds by viewers who were not interested in the story I was living, but in the access this surveillance provided them. They shared images of my body in vulnerable moments, like when I was changing my clothing or sleeping in the middle of the night. They commented on my form. They got off on having caught me off guard.

Even now, I question writing about this experience. Technically, I consented to being filmed. Technically, I agreed to the possibility that anything could be seen. And when I left that house, I said yes again to a career that depends on being seen. I am not outside of surveillance. I am inside it. I benefit from it. I am also shaped by it. I've built my livelihood on visibility. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. My life is content now, by design. In many ways, I want to be seen.

But when someone intentionally searches for, saves, and circulates images of your body, the image becomes a version of nonconsent—exploitation, even. If your image exists publicly, it's treated as public property. The internet does not distinguish between what was offered and what was taken. It distinguishes only between what exists and what does not. And now, in the age of AI, even that distinction is being blurred.

I've found a way to negotiate my own power within this impossible dichotomy. Visibility, when maneuvered correctly, can create opportunity and financial independence. If managed with precision, it can even allow for authorship over your own narrative. That's part of the reason I'm writing this story instead of having it written for me.

For women especially, visibility has become one of the few reliable ways to bypass traditional gatekeepers. We no longer need to be discovered through pageants or talent searches—or, to be coy, the pages of *Playboy*.

But visibility also changes the terms of ownership. Once you become visible enough, the public begins to feel like a participant in your existence. Except

(continued on page 125)

MISS MARCH

TAYLOR HALE

MISS MARCH

TAYLOR HALE

STYLIST: JULIANN McCANDLESS. HAIR: NATHANIEL DEZAN. MAKEUP: KIMORA MULAN. SET DESIGN: PRISCILLA LEE. PRODUCTION: TAYLOR TINDALL.
LIGHTING DIRECTOR: KENNY CASTRO. PHOTO ASSISTANT: JEREMY ERIC SINCLAIR. DIGITAL TECH: RENEE DODGE.

(continued from page 119)

they're not just an audience; they're a stakeholder as well.

Women have, in so many ways, always been at the center of this power struggle. We have long walked the tightrope between visibility and victimhood. Our bodies have always been sites of control. Surveillance intensifies this dynamic by allowing the body to be captured without participation. We've seen this in the paparazzi scandals of the '90s and early aughts, all the way to the creeps wearing Meta glasses to glance down girls' blouses and post their findings on the internet. This disembodiment creates versions of us that circulate, unauthorized, and belong more to a database than to ourselves.

Reality TV was, in many ways, an early prototype for the world we exist in now. What was once an Orwellian premise has quietly become modern infrastructure. Cameras line our streets. Ring doorbells document our movements. We are recorded, unwittingly, in airports and on highways. We film ourselves voluntarily, narrating our routines for platforms designed to reward exposure. We are watched by institutions, corporations, and, increasingly, each other. Surveillance no longer feels oppressive. It feels ordinary.

But the danger of ordinary surveillance is that it stops feeling like surveillance at all.

And yet I continue to participate in this system. I post. I share. I monetize my own visibility. This is the contradiction of modern autonomy: The same exposure that erodes your privacy can also secure your independence.

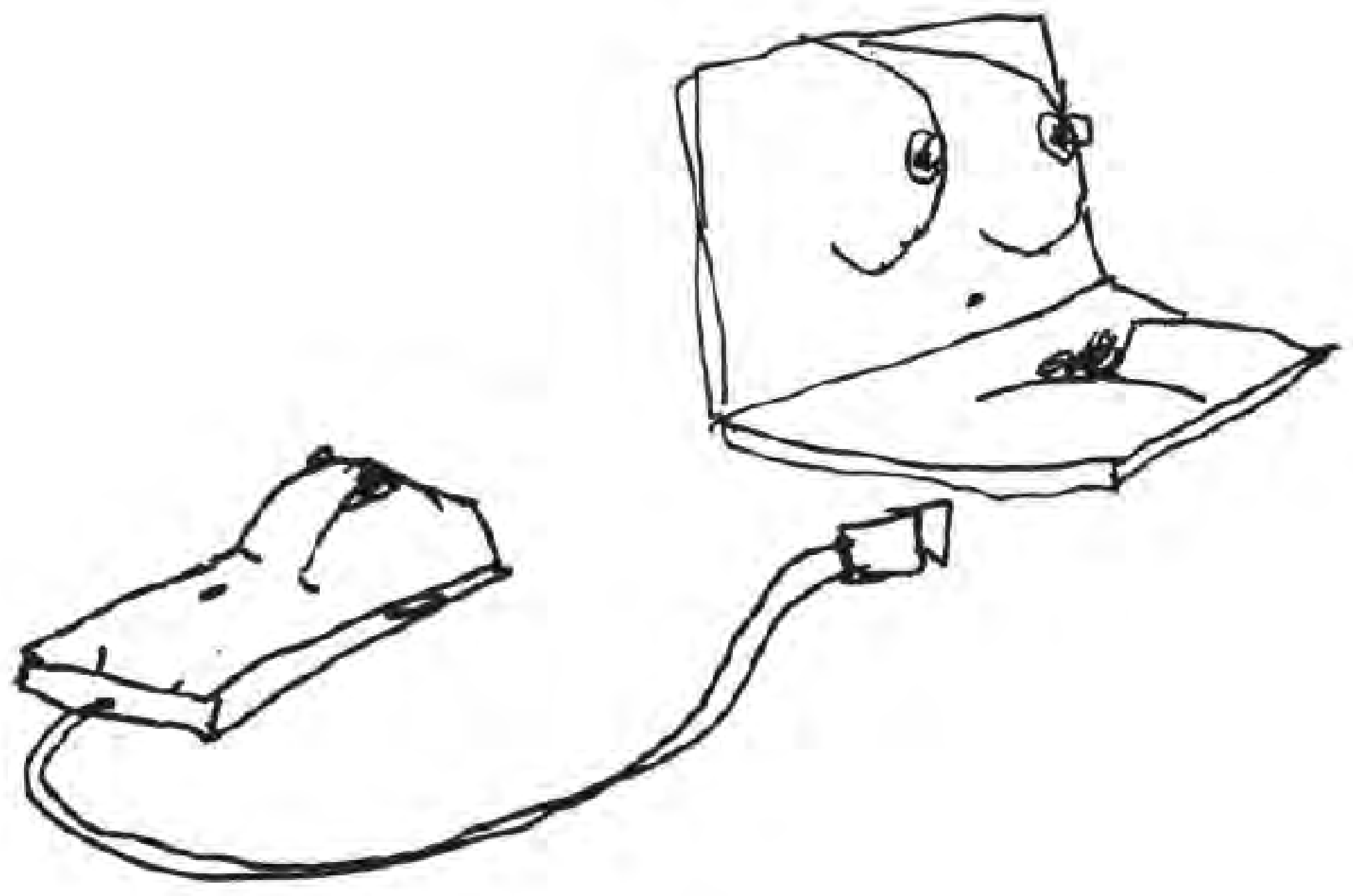
Choosing to be photographed in this way, now, is a direct engagement with this new reality. It's a reminder that my body is not public property simply because it was made public before.

I was an active participant in this photo shoot. I was a collaborator. I assumed my power by becoming a co-creator. I chose the photographer, a woman who understands what I mean when I say I want these images to be something that allows me ownership over my body. I carefully selected the words you read, to explain why this moment feels so special. It's an opportunity for reclamation—for active consent in my most vulnerable form.

Surveillance may be the defining condition of modern life. But consent, real consent, still belongs to the person being seen. This is something none of us should take for granted. And it's something I remain committed to fighting for. Even if it took me posing in my underwear for you to think twice about it.

The Desire Machine

Suddenly, artificial intelligence is touching every part of our erotic lives, from the performers on-screen to the partners in our beds. Adult stars are licensing their digital clones so fans can live their wildest fantasies. Spouses are discovering their partners have been quietly spending thousands on AI girlfriends, and divorce lawyers are scrambling to figure out whether a chatbot counts as a third party. Meanwhile, researchers are warning that outsourcing intimacy to machines makes us worse at the messiness of being human together. Is AI the future of getting off? Or is it just going to get us offline?



Porn Enters the Uncanny Valley

Digital clones of performers are on the rise. Is it a moneymaking dream or a dystopian nightmare?

By Kyle MacNeill

ISABELLA STARES DOWN the barrel of a ludicrously girthy penis. Glossy blonde hair falls onto her enviably accented cheekbones, as her eyes roll back. Within a few seconds, the phallic cannon shoots out a money shot of excess liquidity, plastered over my laptop screen. The scene looks almost real. But it's entirely synthetic.

Isabella is an officially licensed virtual clone of Angelique Rose, a 23-year-old Spanish adult performer. She features on a new porn platform called SinfulX AI (not to be confused with SinfulX the sex toy brand). For two VIZ, roughly 30 cents, she has just responded to a "POV cumshot" prompt. Rose's replicant was created by capturing a range of her expressions in a real-life shoot and then feeding it through an AI app. For SinfulX AI founder Nick, an adult industry veteran who prefers to stay semi-anonymous, it's a logical progression for porn following the OnlyFans boom: "It's another medium that will achieve greater control and probably less frustration."

And it's also a chance to get in on the AI porn gold rush. After OnlyFans pioneered custom content, the triple-X world is now getting tangled up with chatbots and virtual

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **SARA RABIN**

avatars. For years, we've been warned that the robots are coming for us. Now they're asking us to come for them. And human performers are having to play catch-up.

With AI, like any new tech development, things quickly got pornographic. Generative AI first became widely available in the early 2020s. Following the rise of text-to-image services like Stable Diffusion, horny developers began to type their desires into existence. While many platforms blocked NSFW prompts, unfiltered generators like Nastia have since emerged, creating a Wild West of AI Reverse Cowgirls. Many denizens of this kind of content now congregate in the subreddit r/AIpornhub (which boasts 450,000 members).

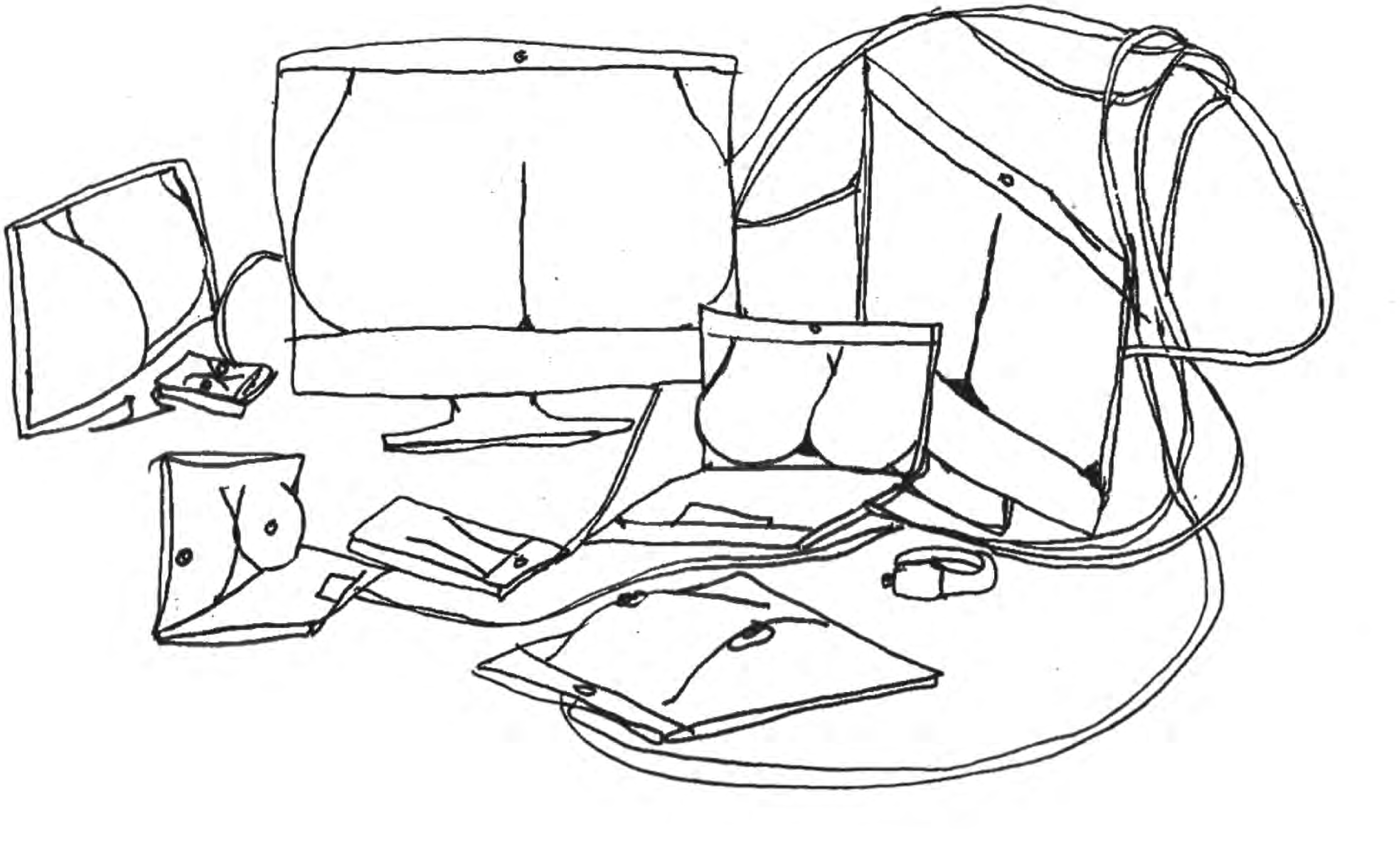
In the more repulsive cesspits of the online world, apps and sites like MrDeepFakes (which shut down in May 2025) made it possible to "nudify" real women without their consent. Even mainstream AIs like Grok, developed by Elon Musk, have been censured for generating "undressed" images. Regardless, other mainstream AI assistants are now going NSFW: OpenAI is set to offer an adult mode for ChatGPT to enable mature conversations later this year.

Elsewhere, more dedicated and legitimate AI porn sites have launched, like Candy.AI, SpicyChat, and Joi.AI, offering a roster of customizable virtual glamour models and cartoon characters to chat with. On Candy.AI, for example, users can slide into the DMs of the likes of Darkangel666 (a 23-year-old "unhinged" goth), Nia (a "captivating" 26-year-old jazz singer), or Lucy (a pregnant 21-year-old anime character)—or create their own AI companion. A premium subscription gives you tokens to spend on generating NSFW images and starting sexy voice calls.

Nick thinks they're too girlfriend-experience orientated, but he shares their desire to realize people's wildest wet dreams: "Our tagline is 'Turn your fantasies into AI realities.'" This is the sell for AI erotica. Rule 34, a maxim that everything imaginable has been portrayed in porn, has now been taken to its logical extremes. Soon, if you want to instantly generate a giantess getting it on with a video game character, you probably can. "The possibilities are endless. People can express themselves. They can find their kinks for things that will never exist," Nick says.

The industry is now faced with a gigantic conundrum: How to respond? The natural instinct is to rally against it. "When I hear 'AI and porn,' my mind goes straight to slop.... Sexual content is becoming more synthetic, lazy, overproduced, and bland," says ethical porn pioneer Erika Lust. "Porn is already an ecosystem flooded with ugly, repetitive material: the same angles, the same scripts, the same bodies framed the same way. AI doesn't magically fix that. It scales it."

But where Lust fears the loss of the human touch, Vic Lagina, who was a lead producer and director for the porn production company Brazzers for 16 years and is the author of *Filthy!: The Rise and (Pending) Death of Vic Lagina*, welcomes it. "As a former business owner in porn, the prospect of completely eliminating humans from the equation in porn production would be extremely enticing," he wrote in an email to *Playboy*, celebrating an end to "self-serving attitudes of performers,... questions about revoked consent despite whatever rigid protocols are in



place, … bad hygiene, … and waiting for wood from a shaky male performer" before concluding: "It sounds like a dream."

Perhaps that's why many major adult entertainment brands are already trying to capture and repurpose performers' likenesses for future use. Rachel Steele, an AVN MILF of the Year nominee, remembers getting a 19-page contract from a mainstream production company. It stated, she says, that they could voice-clone and own her likeness for "perpetuity" in any "universe" without compensation. "Like, if I decide to move to Mars," she asks incredulously, "they still own my twin?" That might explain why some fictional AI models are Frankensteinian amalgamations of real performers. (Nick says SinfulX's original virtual avatars are based on a catalogue of licensed images of IRL porn stars, which are blended together to create new avatars that are entirely original.)

It's why some adult content creators, like Rose, are actively and officially licensing their image to ensure they get paid fairly. Chloe Amour, a legendary 34-year-old porn star who re-entered the adult industry in 2024 after a five-year hiatus, has partnered with Joi.AI alongside fictional models (like "romantic posh rebel" Delaney) to develop a chatbot modeled on her real self that can send raunchy nudes based on what users request in the conversations. She wants it to fulfill her fans' wishes. "You're spending your hard-earned money on something, and you want to be satisfied by the product. And I am a person, but I am also a product—sometimes," she says.

For porn stars like Amour, who already boast an existing dedicated fan base, creating a digital twin could be a lucrative source of income. "It's a way of printing money while they sleep," Nick says. Amour says it frees up time, and time is money. She's so busy with juggling shoots, socials, and the rest of it, she says, she needs a second Chloe Amour. Now she has just that. But it doesn't just mean she saves time—she can also withstand time. Digital twins don't "age out" like human adult performers. "I can go on forever," says Amour, laughing. "I'll look back and be like, 'Oh, she's still getting it like she used to!' "

Steele gets this temptation. "[My digital twin] could literally work for me while I'm, you know, with my toes in the sand and a beer in my hand somewhere," she says. She remembers performers being courted at an XBIZ convention by an AI representative: "Everyone's ego [was] stroked by [the idea of it], because who doesn't want to see more of themselves?" But she's actually concerned about lasting forever—she thinks some companies might resurrect performers' likenesses, Tupac-hologram-style, long after they have left the industry. And there are already teething issues when it comes to the relationship between real performers and AI companies: Angelique Rose's character used to be called Angelique and was ostensibly based on her, but it has since been anonymized by request.

But why would fans of Amour or Steele, anyway, choose to watch a robot of them versus the real thing? Amour positions her virtual avatar as a quick fix to give them "immediate satisfaction" and to offer a more affordable, entry-level alternative to expensive customs. She also thinks it allows fans to reimagine her to their heart's content; if all porn is fantasy, AI extends it further. They could, she says, generate her in a bridal dress for a wedding fantasy without her having to spend hours creating the scene. Nick, meanwhile, thinks it might be a way for people to explore hardcore interests, knowing that it didn't actually happen: "To watch a girl or guy being spanked could be a bit intimidating. But you can explore that fetish through AI in a softer way."

It remains to be seen, though, whether these cash-splashing AI porn consumers will be trusted to keep it soft. What happens when they try to get the fake Chloe Amour to do things the real Chloe Amour doesn't want to do? According to Joi.AI, there are restrictions in place to respect real performers' virtual boundaries; the bot will not, for example, entertain being humiliated. But, as seen with Grok and the like, fans are already creating twisted scenarios out of the performers' control, proliferating a violation of privacy. "When sex becomes frictionless, it stops reflecting real intimacy and starts training people to expect control without responsibility," Lust warns.

For now, on many dedicated platforms, the possible fantasies are relatively vanilla. SinfulX's original soft launch allowed more custom prompts (such as the poetic "POV, cumshot, blonde, forest"), which does seem to be a game-changing feature. But Nick says they simplified it and made a limited range of buttons, as only about 20 percent of their "tech-savvy" user base were typing in anything imaginative. (Thinking with your penis, it turns out, is not a good idea.)

He emphasizes that SinfulX will still try to satisfy niche fetishes, now that it has loaded up 70 popular scenarios: "We have a category called 'Monster Cock' we're rolling out on different models. People want to see a giant cock, right? Because it's exciting and it's unlikely you will see it in reality." The platform, he says, is set to release new possibilities on a weekly basis.

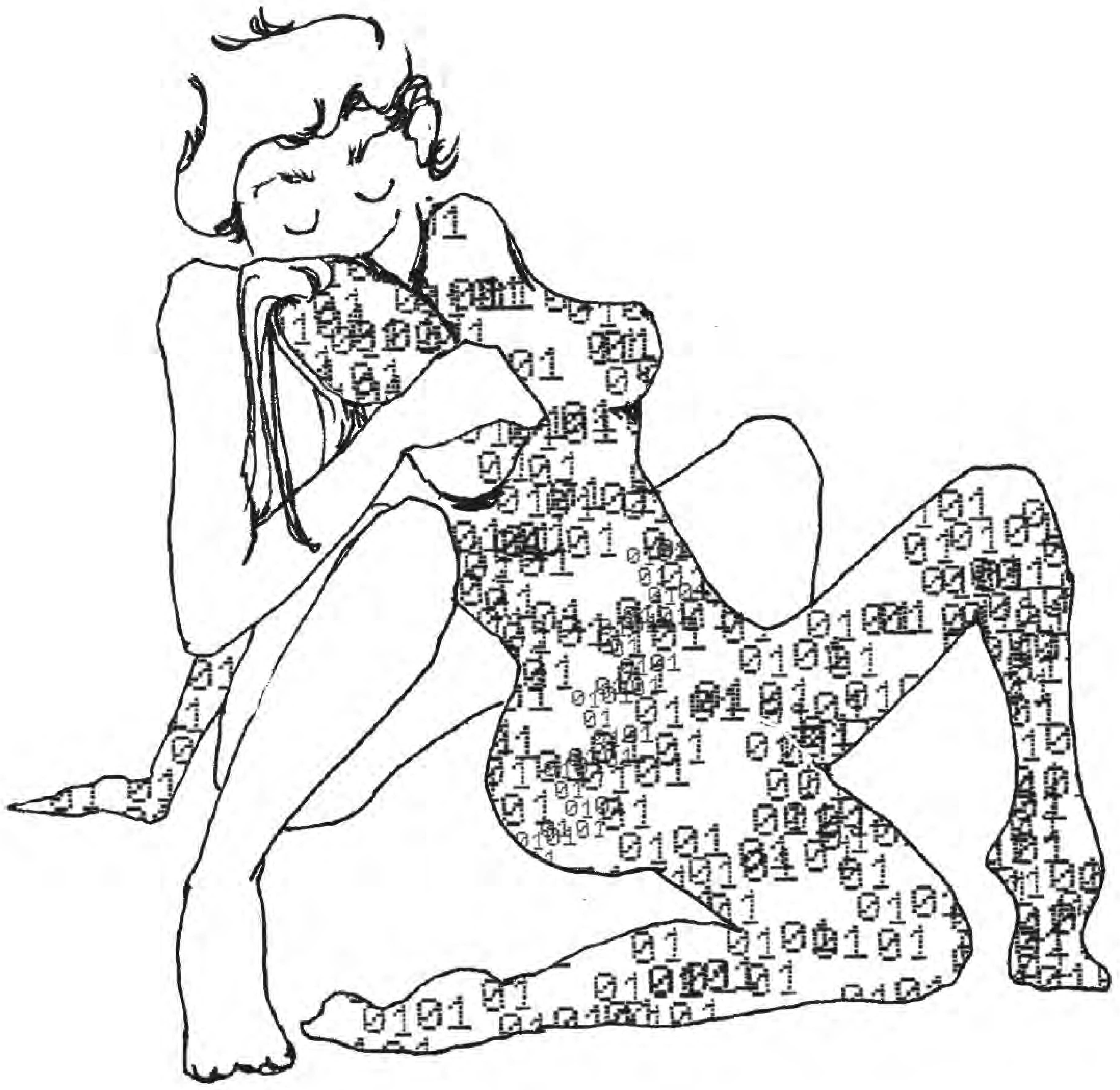
Currently, though, the options on these legitimate AI porn platforms are, ironically, generic. "AI systems often reproduce the same narrow, biased ideas of beauty, race, gender, and desire, while pretending to be limitless," Lust says. Plus, the UI is dodgy, the clips last mere seconds, and some pricing structures could be described as translucent at best.

Perhaps bringing an anime girlfriend to life makes most sense, but it's hard to see why anyone would pay money to generate an AI model giving an AI dick a blow job, when they can watch a real model doing the same, in a far higher-quality video. Perhaps, the most fervent users actively get off on the AI element, sex robot–style. "People do find pleasure in the combination of technology and sex even when there are more 'realistic' options available, including human-to-human, offline interactions," says Peter Alilunas, a professor of cinema studies at University of Oregon in Eugene and a member of the editorial board of the academic journal *Porn Studies*.

For others, though, these limitations render these platforms useless. But it's probably not a smart idea to insult the intelligence of these platforms; like all AI, it's only going to get bigger, better, and unsloppier. If AI imagery soon becomes indiscernible from the real thing, that will be applied to porn too. Lagina's closing words are dystopian: "My advice to organic performers who don't have skills or a plan outside of porn: save your money and up your game as your fans are fickle and will gravitate towards the digital version of you for a better experience."

Lust is more hopeful that humans will fight back against the slop onslaught: "I think we're going to see a split become sharper. One path is mass, automated porn—fast, disposable, impersonal—where human labor and performer rights are treated as obstacles to efficiency. The other path, which I believe will grow, is responsible desire: consumers who actively want real humans, real connection, real intimacy, real images—and who start to value transparency as part of arousal."

For now, we're in an in-between moment. The future of AI porn isn't bright or dim yet—but it's already in motion. "It will be sloppier, cleaner, uncannier, bigger, smaller, hyperrealistic, completely artificial, indistinguishable from reality, and everything in between—it will be all those things, because there will be many systems that make it," Alilunas says. Where some people in the adult industry will see red flags, others will see dollar signs. All at the thought of customers' eyes fixed on bogus monster penises, as they feed the virtual beast with more real cash.



A Chatbot Stole My Wife

What happens when AI relationships enter divorce court.

By Rae Witte

"I don't know if he's having an affair. He's not leaving the house, but he's not interacting with me."

This is a version of what a client recently told Megan Noble, a family law attorney in Kansas City, Missouri. After a little digging, they found out the client's husband was cheating on her—sort of. "He had spent a ton of money on subscriptions for AI virtual girlfriends," Noble says.

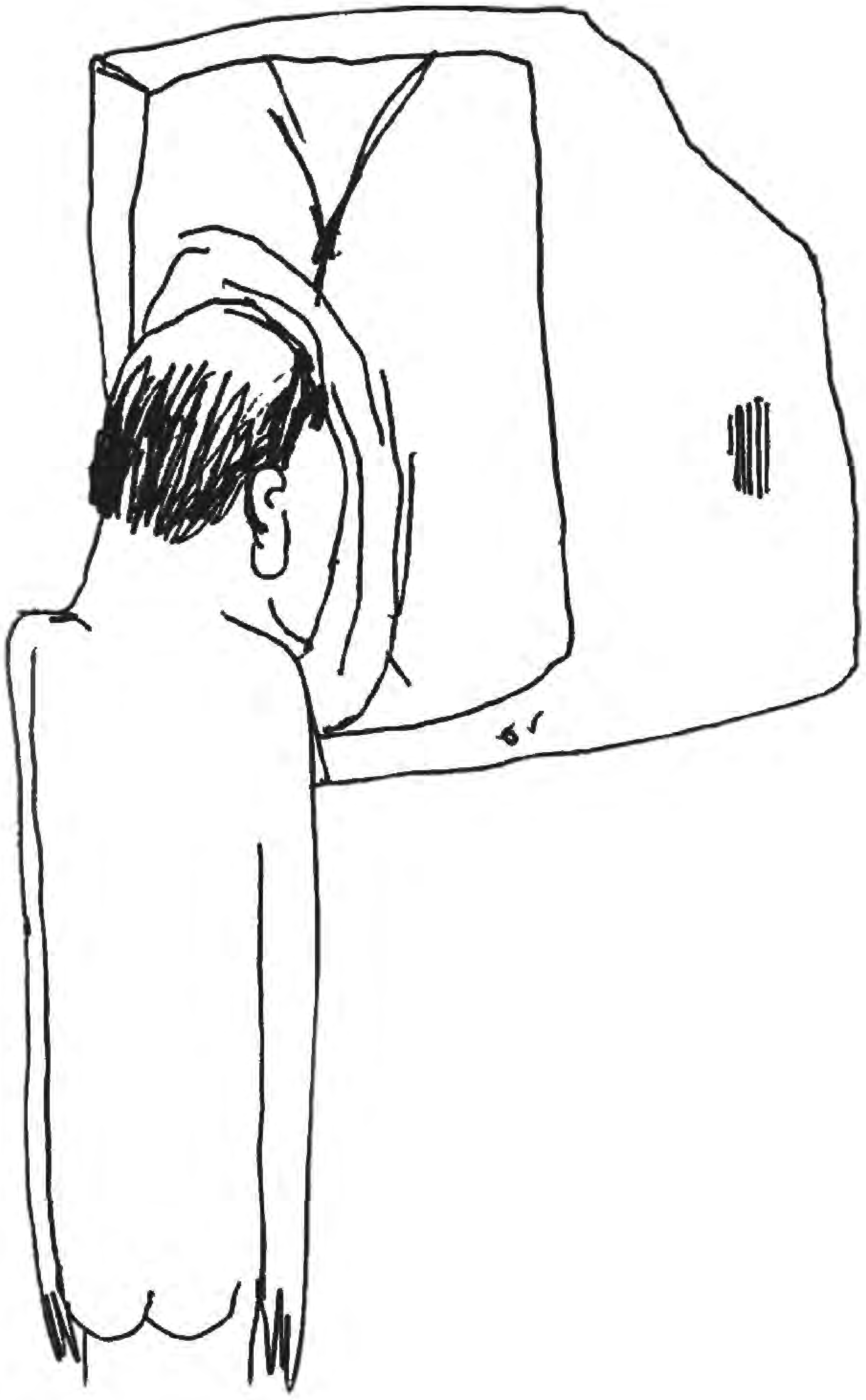
For Noble, the calls have become familiar. "Clients say, 'I didn't know that my spouse had a $50,000 credit card out there,' and it's for AI [chatbot] stuff," she says. The trend is already showing up in divorce filings. Divorce-Online, the U.K. online divorce provider, reported an increase in divorce applications in early 2025, with filings referencing a partner's relationship with AI chatbots from platforms such as Replika, Anima, DreamBF.AI, and WifeGPT. This past November, *Wired* reported that a "divorce boom" was on the horizon, noting that a "new legal frontier is emerging in family law" due to AI romances. Now states are having to discern whether or not an AI chatbot is considered a third party and, in turn, if a relationship with one is a viable cause for divorce.

But will all this AI companionship really lead to more divorces? James Sexton, a divorce lawyer in New York, doesn't think so. "It may be the newest manifestation of an age-old problem, which is we're not particularly good at monogamy," he says. "The problem of loneliness, the problem of alienation from your partner, the problem of feeling disconnected—we throw new things at them all the time." Prostitution, porn, chat rooms, social media DMs and disappearing messages, OnlyFans and subscriptions to online sex workers, and now chatbot relationships are just the newest iterations. "None of them seem to do a particularly good job," he says. "They're all Band-Aids on a bullet wound."

Still, cheating is cheating, whether it's with a human or a bot, says Maryanne Fisher, a professor of psychology at Saint Mary's University in Nova Scotia and an affiliate faculty member at the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University, in Bloomington. "It really comes down to what's actually leading that person to choose the outlet instead of the partner or the relationship," she says. "I think intention is what's important, and that's a really hard one to talk about legally, let alone philosophically or psychologically."

In divorce court, hurt feelings don't carry much weight. "[Clients] feel, 'This is embarrassing, and I'm angry and I want to punish them.' To what extent? Because there's no remedy in the law that says, 'OK, you cheated with AI, or you had a relationship with AI. This is how we're going to punish you,'" says Noble. "We tell clients the court doesn't care if you're cheating. What they care about is if you're depleting marital assets." That, of course, can be a major issue with chatbot affairs, as people secretly spend thousands on subscriptions and in-app purchases.

Even then, not only is it unlikely that chatbots will lead to a divorce boom, but they also won't be the sole cause of a divorce. If someone digitally steps out on their relationship with a chatbot, there are other issues at play. "The AI didn't find the person," Fisher says. "The AI didn't come and say, 'Hey, do you want to engage in cybersex?'" It may be the conduit, but it isn't the cause.



Intimacy on Easy Mode

Why experts think AI could make us worse at human relationships.

By Matt Klein

AI IS APPEARING IN PLACES once reserved for other people: dating apps, emotional support, sex. Chatbots now help draft breakup texts, talk people through fights, flirt on demand, and stay up all night listening. They don't misread signals or pick fights. They don't get tired or need space. And that's starting to worry people who study how relationships actually work.

The problem is that AI smooths out the friction that relationships actually need.

"AI is quietly redefining intimacy as something we receive, rather than something we build," says Bryony Cole, a sex-tech researcher and founder of the *Future of Sex* website. Real relationships take work. Misunderstandings, apologies, showing up when it's inconvenient. AI sidesteps all of that. "With AI, we can bypass discomfort," Cole says. "And while we can feel connected and understood, we interrupt the process of learning how to show up when connection actually asks something of us."

Cole worries that ease comes at a price. "Our ability to be messy in relation to each other is a muscle we have to develop," she says. "How do we learn to tolerate imperfect responses, navigate misunderstandings, grow our capacity to apologize? Through real life, which is a constant practice of showing up."

David Pearl, a psychotherapist based in Nashville, sees that messiness as essential to why relationships work at all. "Recognizing that conflict is a natural part of a relationship is crucial in learning how to manage it effectively," he says. "It's this work of repairing that brings us closer and ultimately makes the relationship fulfilling." Without conflict, there's nothing to repair. Without repair, there's less reason to stay invested.

For most of human history, intimacy required physical proximity. Bodies had to be in the same room. "Friction requires physicality," says Andrew McLuhan, a media theorist and grandson of Marshall. "No body, no problem."

Technology has steadily chipped away at that. Screens, platforms, and systems now allow interaction without another body present at all. "We've gone so far as to put a plate of glass between each other," McLuhan says, "like in the visitation room of a secure prison." (Romantic!)

When interaction no longer requires another body, or another will, something flattens. "The further away we get from each other, the further we get from meaning and satisfaction," says McLuhan.

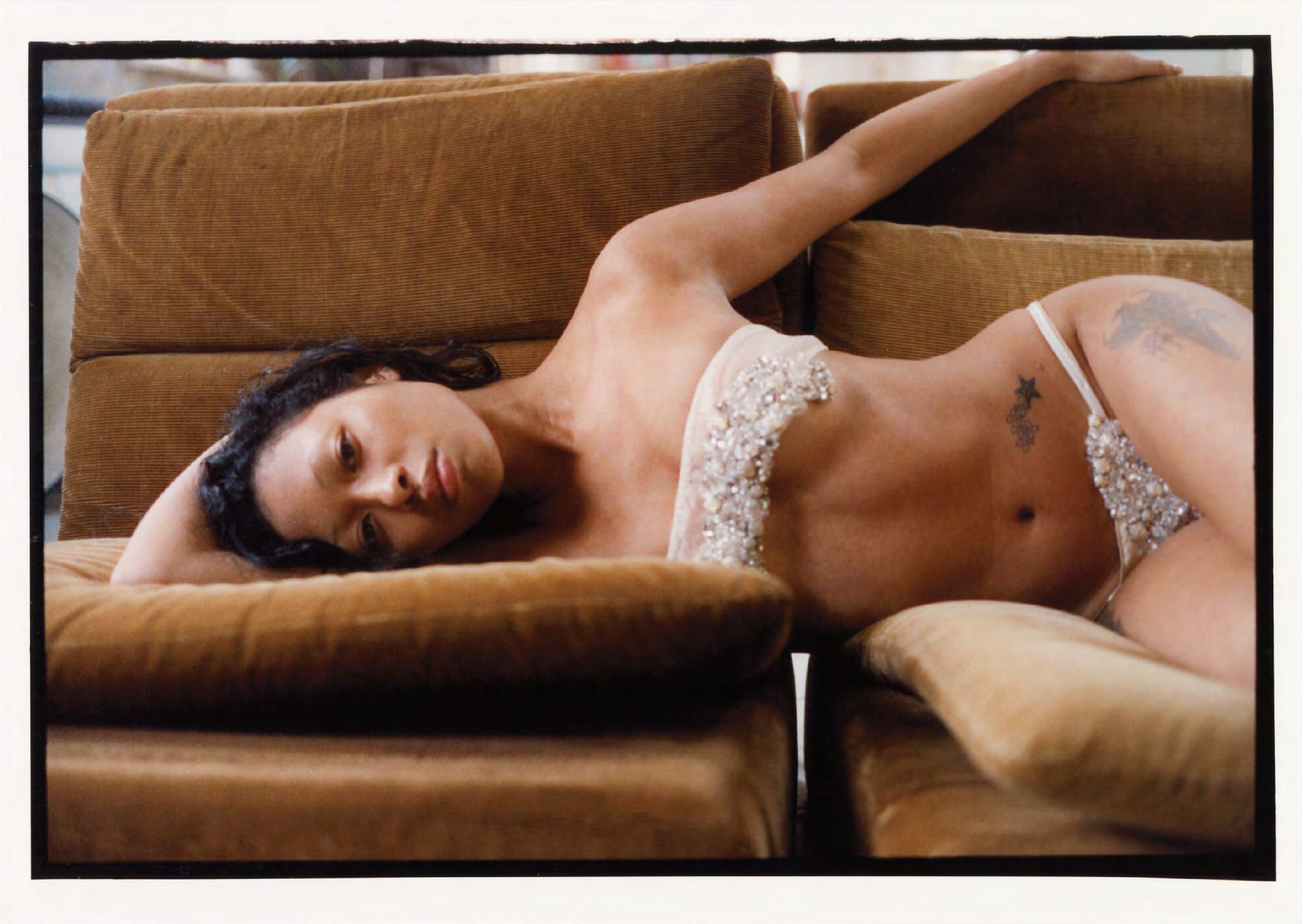
And that's where we are. Choosing AI over an unpredictable human makes sense. Life is fucking hard. Social anxiety is real and rejection stings. But intimacy is born from confusion, cringe, and apologies. An awkward collision of teeth during a kiss. The relief that comes when a misunderstanding finally clears. The risk of saying what you actually want in bed. You can engineer away that discomfort. Or you can stay human. Real intimacy requires friction, and friction is desire.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A NAKED WOMAN
"It was only after I started taking self-portraits that I became interested in shooting people nude," says photographer Jessica Madavo, who opens our story with a dramatic spread.

Girls on Film

We invited some of our favorite lady photographers to explore the art of the nude. They grabbed their friends, muses, and themselves to celebrate in front of the camera.

NONCHALOIR
Zahra first caught Madavo's eye during an art performance. The photographer was "enamored by her energy," and she became a muse of sorts.

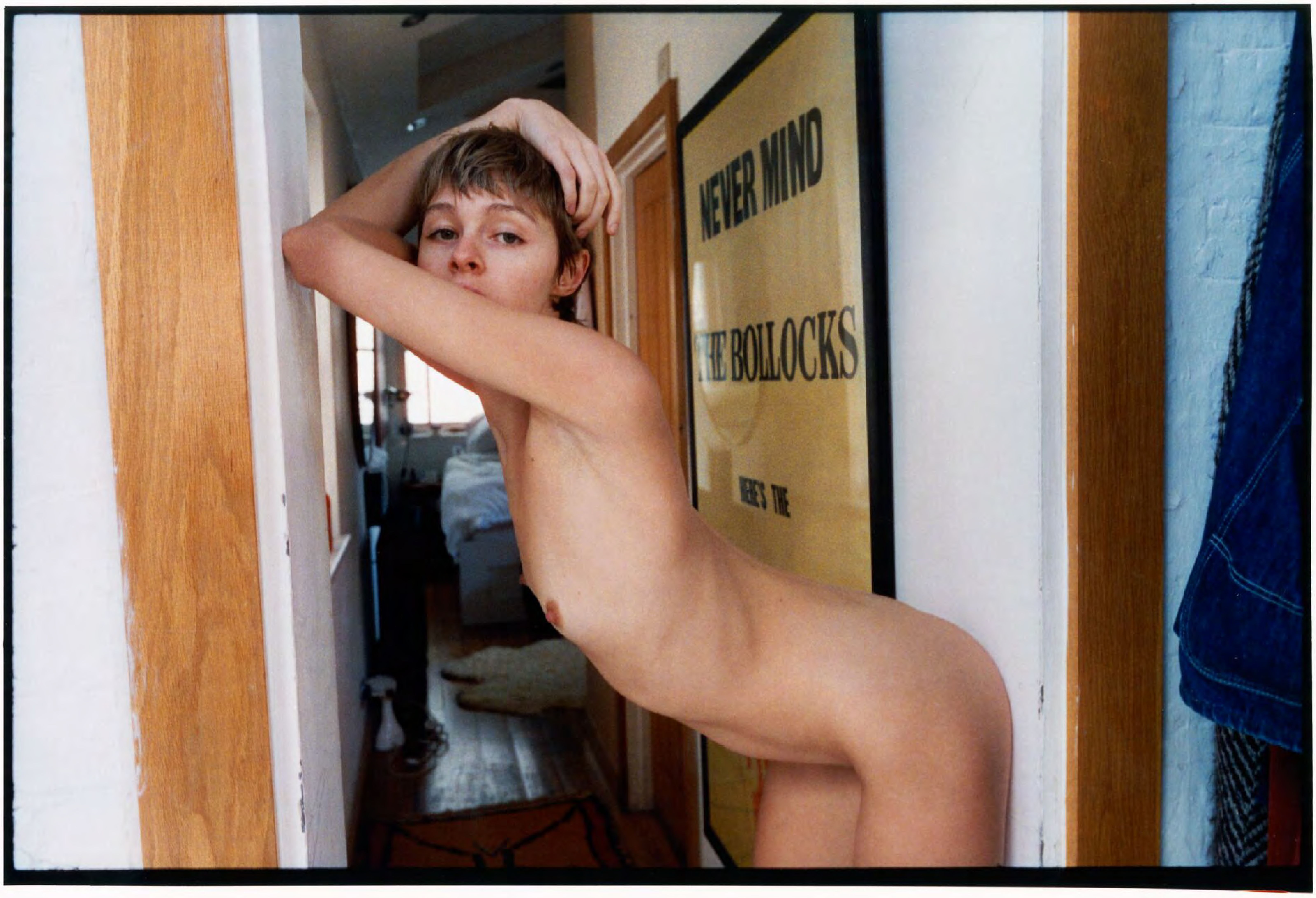


Jessica Madavo

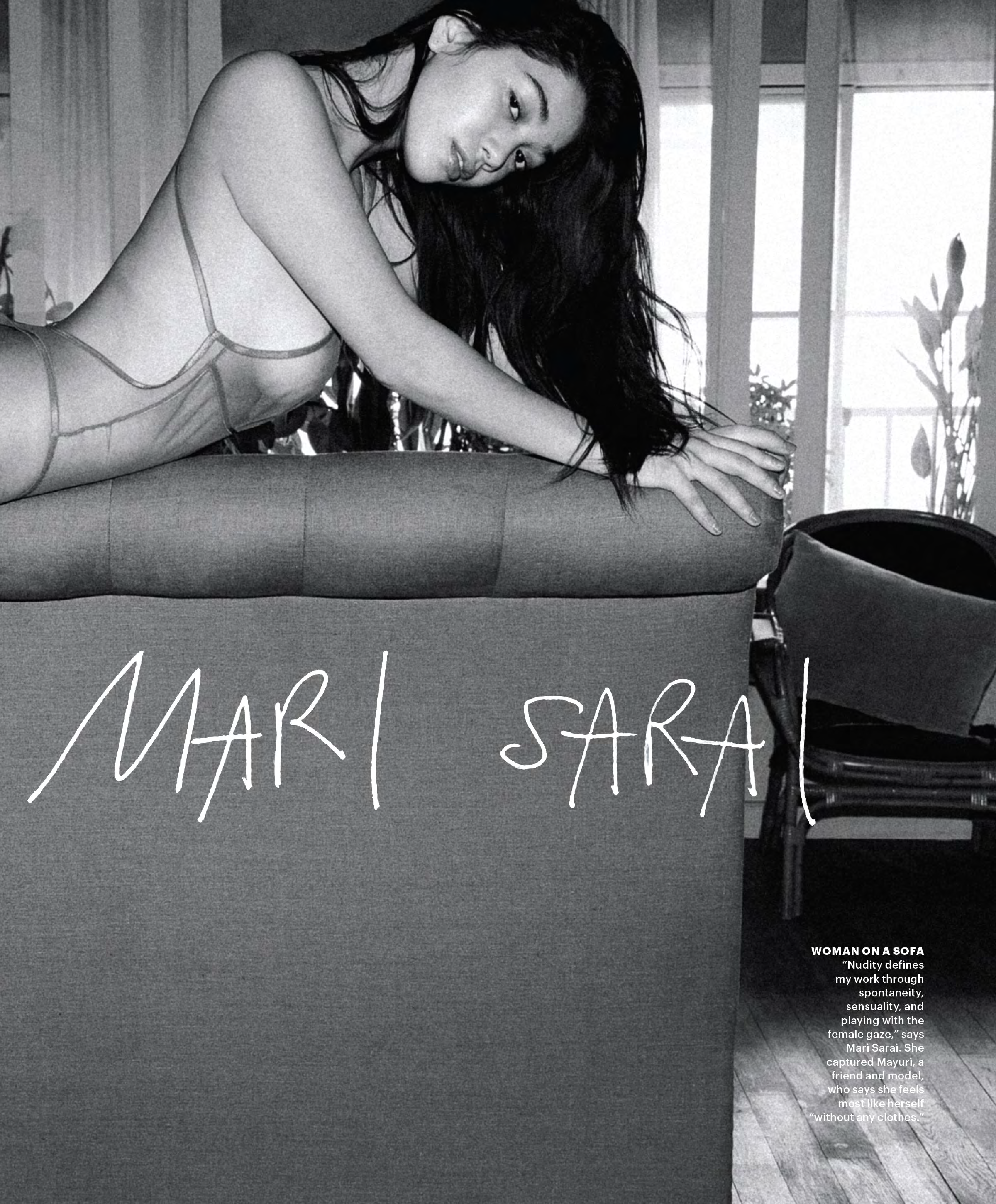
AFTER THE FALL
"I hope I can make people feel like they can be themselves," Madavo says. "I show love by giving love."

MUSE WITH THE GLOBES
Leave it to a woman to know the very best angles—and the most compelling curves. "I love all parts of the body," Madavo says.

ARCH AND POINT Alice became a friend after the photographer's boyfriend made an introduction.


NEVER MIND
THE BOLLOCKS
HERE'S THE

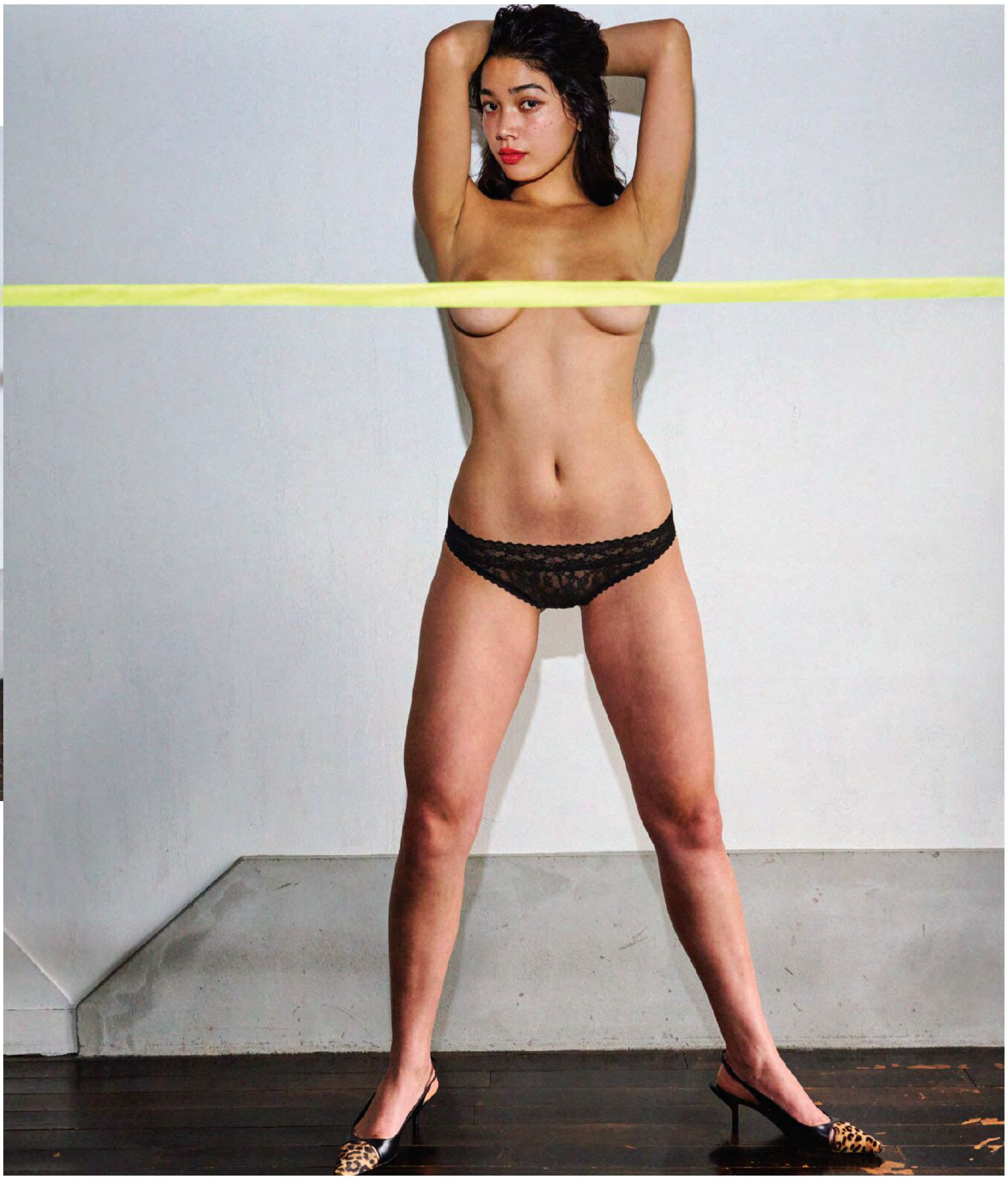
PHOTOGRAPHER: JESSICA MADAVO. MODELS: ZAHRA VAN MGUYEN AND ALICE RILEY. WARDROBE: GENEVIEVE DEVINE. LOCATION: JONAH FREUD.



MARI SARAI

WOMAN ON A SOFA "Nudity defines my work through spontaneity, sensuality, and playing with the female gaze," says Mari Sarai. She captured Mayuri, a friend and model, who says she feels most like herself "without any clothes."

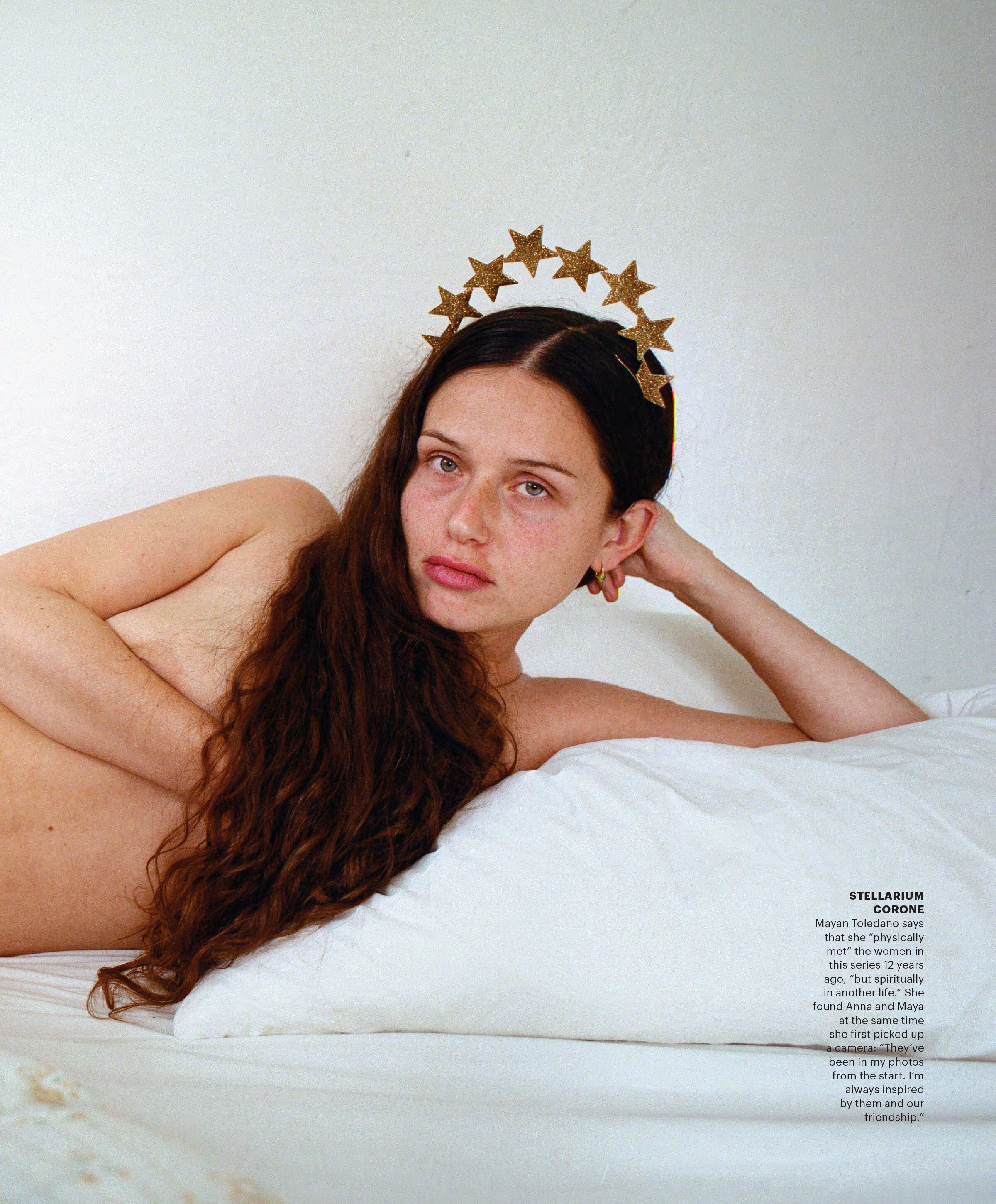
THE RED VINEYARD Sarai doesn't have a specific part of the body she loves to photograph most—rather, she focuses on the "attitude of the body," she says.



TRUE FORM
“While being engaged with the model, we can challenge her to pull out her true inner self, to celebrate being women with love,” says Sarai.

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARI SARAI. MODEL: MAYURI TATE. STYLIST: TSUYOSHI NOGUCHI.
HAIR: GO UTSUGI. MAKEUP: YUKA HIRAC. PHOTO ASSISTANT: YOSUKE ASAMA.

Mayan Toledano



STELLARIUM CORONE
Mayan Toledano says that she "physically met" the women in this series 12 years ago, "but spiritually in another life." She found Anna and Maya at the same time she first picked up a camera: "They've been in my photos from the start. I'm always inspired by them and our friendship."

LE MIROIR MAGIQUE Nudity, Toledano insists, "has to do with softness." She says, "I try to arrive behind the camera from a place of not knowing—allowing the person I'm with to look at me rather than being looked at."

OPEN WINDOW
Toledano wants to leave her friends with "a hug that feels like fresh, crisp sheets from the laundry after the beach, when your skin is still warm."

PHOTOGRAPHER: MAYAN TOLEDANO. MODELS: ANNA SHARON AND MAYA ROO.

Playboy Interview

NIA LONG

A candid conversation with one of Hollywood's most enduring sex symbols on love, Michael Jackson, and being everyone's fantasy.

By Jamilah Lemieux

Photographs by Max Montgomery

For more than three decades, Nia Long has found her way into some of Black America's most beloved and quotable films and TV shows: *Boyz n the Hood*, *Friday*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *The Best Man*, *Love Jones.* That last title alone inspired a generation of spoken-word poets, for better or worse, and has been playing on a loop in the cultural imagination ever since—which is why she's teaming back up with costar Larenz Tate for a new romantic drama. Long specializes in Black stories, told straight, with universal appeal, and she's been name-dropped by everyone from Jay-Z to J. Cole to A Tribe Called Quest as shorthand for what fine looks like.

At 55, she's also still the baddest. "I want what I want, and I want it the way that I want it," she tells *Playboy*. Now she's taking on the highest-stakes role of her career: Katherine Jackson in *Michael*, the most anticipated and contested biopic in years. Long sat down with writer and cultural critic Jamilah Lemieux in Los Angeles to talk about her work, and why freedom is all she ever really wanted.

Many of us were introduced to you via *Love Jones*. I was obsessed with that movie for years. It took place in Chicago, my hometown, and that's what I thought relationships and adulthood were supposed to look like. Did you have any idea how important that movie would be?

No, we didn't. When I read the script, it was the same feeling I had when I read *Boyz n the Hood.* ...I felt like *Love Jones* was such an extension of who I am. My father was a poet; my mother's an artist. We're from Brooklyn, but Chicago and New York have some symmetry. I just knew it was honest, and I think when something is honest, it's good. When *Love Jones* came out, it was considered a box office flop. We didn't make a lot of money, but what we created was something cultural and iconic. That is more valuable than anything.

Fans lost their minds when it was announced that you and Larenz Tate are reuniting for another romantic drama. Can you tell us a little bit about it? Is it true that it's based on neo-soul singer Maxwell's *Urban Hang Suite* album?

It is. I love Maxwell. I grew up listening to Maxwell; he's a personal friend. It took us three years to get the film set up, and it's a really cool concept. It's sort of an extension of where Nina and Darius [from *Love Jones*] could be today, but it's a completely different film. There's a lot more comedy. We're parents now. We literally just wrapped a couple of weeks ago. I love Larenz. That's my guy, forever and ever and ever.

You all have something very special on camera.

When we were about to start shooting, I think we were both nervous because it had been years since we had shared camera time together. And after the first day, I think we both looked at each other like, *Yeah, we still got it.*

Everyone has a core memory related to Michael Jackson and/or the Jackson Five. What is yours?

I have two. My mother used to work at his record label, and she actually did some artwork for the back of one of his albums. I walked in[to the label office] and there were all these photos of Michael Jackson, and she's like, "Let's take these. He's going to be a big star." He was already a star, but this was the beginning of his solo [career].

My most precious memory of Michael Jackson was at a Stevie Wonder concert. I was walking up a flight of steps, and as I was headed down to the stage, in walks Michael Jackson with [*Boyz n the Hood* director] John Singleton. He was like, "Hi, Nia Long!" I literally couldn't speak. He was such a real person. So when he said your name, it wasn't on some "I'm Michael Jackson and you're whoever you are." He genuinely wanted to connect in that moment, and I remember the energy of a real superstar wanting to connect with me at the very beginning of my career. So to play his mom in this film is a privilege.

How did you prepare for that role? Katherine Jackson is arguably the most important mother in music history.

I agree. I prayed a lot because my interpretation can be my interpretation, but what the world needs my interpretation to be is kind of beyond my control. The work comes through me, not to me. And so I had to kind of trust my instincts. Antoine Fuqua, the director, would always say, "Trust the process." At first, I was like, "Stop saying that to me." And then I'm like, "OK, I need you to say that to me today." We had tough days, and we had easy days, like any other movie set. But I think the common thread in all of this is everyone involved really loves and adores Michael Jackson, and we wanted to get it right. And although the film went through some changes, the version everyone will see is really, really spectacular and entertaining. And I think Michael would be happy.

There's going to be a lot of scrutiny over this movie, from people who are very passionate about Michael Jackson and people who are very critical of him alike. How do you plan to protect your sanity? Are you going to read the think pieces, or are you going offline?

No one can interfere with my sanity. That's number one. I learned a long time ago that you cannot be successful in this industry if you listen to the noise and the distractions. And the one thing that I am very, very, very protective of is my peace. Because in order for me to do what I do, I have to commit to that first. Although there will be noise, and there will be things that are out of my control. Listen, everyone's entitled to their opinion, but I'm here to interpret a story, to represent a woman, to represent a mother, to represent a Black woman who, in my opinion, is the real hero in all of this. I know what it's like to be a mom carrying the weight, and when I think of grace, I think of Katherine Jackson.

Say more.

She's the epitome of grace. It's the ability to carry people, things, circumstances, time, elegance, secrets. It's anger, happiness. It's being a woman who is in charge, but she's quiet. That's grace.

This is *Playboy*—

OK, let's get sexy.

I want to get sexy! But we don't ask men about dating and sex the way we ask women. So I feel a little guilty wanting to ask you these questions, but we're pretty—
Straightforward. I mean, we're the ones who make it spicy.

It's hard for those of us who aren't actors to imagine portraying intimacy with somebody that we find attractive. Have you ever been attracted to one of your costars?
I've definitely been attracted to or able to find something attractive about them, but I think when I'm in the moment and working, it doesn't—the two don't go together because you're there for one specific thing. You can admire someone and go, "Oh, he looks good today," and not act on it.

You've been everybody's crush for a very long time. How has being the subject of so much public desire impacted your sexuality?
Well, I'm not as exciting as the rap songs [claim]. I get a kick out of it because it means that I've contributed something to the culture—that is comforting, that is inspiring, that's sexy! I don't take any of it so seriously, though. Nia, who everyone knows in public, is very different from who I am on a daily basis. I get up in the morning. I take my kid to school. I make breakfast. My older one has graduated from college, but I have a junior high schooler, and I'm a regular mom.

Are you dating? Are you balancing your social life with your work life and your mommy life?
I can't even answer that question. I probably shouldn't answer that question. Am I "dating?" I don't like that word.

Why not?
I feel like that requires me to go out and do something. I do think that if you're looking for a partner, you have to be actively out there in order to meet. But I am not in that space right now. I'm really focused on my kids, my work, and my girlfriends, and going out and having a good time.… I like to get up and do what I want to do when I want to do it. It's not that I don't want to have a partner, but I was in a relationship for a very long time and I'm enjoying getting to know myself without feeling the need to be of service to a relationship. I want to be of service to myself, to my children, and to my career. And when the right man comes along [whom] I choose to commit to, then perhaps he will be of service to me.

When you're ready.
See, here's the thing with me. When I date, I end up staying with that person.

You've never had a situationship.
I've never had that. I need one.

It's intense. It's quick, it's fun, and then it's over. The trick is to make sure they go when you want them to, not that they leave you.
Yeah, I don't want to be left. That's annoying. Also, here's my biggest thing about dating. People talk too much. I need them to shut up. If we're going to have a one-night stand, I almost feel like I need to have them sign NDAs.

You absolutely should make them sign an NDA.
There are a lot of people that I would be down to have a little fun with! Not a lot, but some.

Have you taken advantage of the access to men that you have, Nia? I'm getting the impression that there have been some honeys in your radar that you let slip by.
Let me just start here: The new way of dating is so—I don't even understand what's happening! First of all, if I text you and you take a day, I'm never talking to you again. Never talking again.

There seems to be an uptick in women enjoying the company of younger men.
I'm a big fan of this. I love it. Why not?

Given that a spin yet?
See, I told you I'm not really out there. I got to get out there.

You've got to get on the dating apps. They have one for famous people!
What's it called?

Raya.
I can't be on Raya because I wouldn't even keep up. They'll be like, "She's flaky! Get her off of here!" I'm so picky. I'm really picky. I do like younger, though. I think there's something fun about younger.

Young is fun.
And they also go home.

I remember Whoopi Goldberg famously saying, "I don't want a man in my house."
I've been to her house. She's fine with her gardenias and herself. Yeah. And her big, beautiful staircase. Whoopi doesn't play. I learned a lot from Whoopi, actually.

What else have you learned from her?
I learned to have a voice on set, to take up space, to ask for what I need to commit to the work, to try new things, to just be free. I was really young when we did that film together, *Made in America*. What I noticed about her work is that every take was different, and she's very fluid, like riding the

tide in the ocean. Nothing mechanical, it always felt natural.

Single motherhood is often stigmatized, especially for Black women. When I was prepping for this interview, I realized I've never heard you criticized for being a single mother. Is that something that you've experienced in your private life or from fans?
Well, first of all, we are in charge of our choices. So if I'm empowered by my own choice, I can never be a victim of my circumstances. I have had beautiful relationships with both of my children's fathers. It didn't work out. It doesn't mean I don't love 'em. It doesn't mean we're not cool. It doesn't mean we're not friends. It doesn't mean that we still can't have family time together. It only means that we don't have to be romantically involved with each other, but we can still celebrate our children.

I love what you said about still having that beautiful relationship with your children's fathers. I think we should talk more openly about co-parenting.
I love my co-parenting situation. We have the best: We go on holidays. We go on vacation. Sometimes we carve out space to go to dinner. We went to dinner the other night, and we had a really good time. And then it's like, "OK, bye. Have fun. Talk to you later." But there's still a sense of community within that where I can call them if [our sons] need something or they can call me. There's obviously boundaries there, but we can still be a family. We can still be proud of the legacy that we're creating in our careers separately. And it works. We make it work. Really, I make it work. I'm not giving anyone else the credit.

Mama usually does make it work.
We are the designers. We are the architects. We are the ones who can visualize what we want to see for our children, and make them the priority.

You have two Black sons in a country that is often unkind to Black people. In what ways has your privilege protected them, and in what ways has it been unable to protect them?
I wouldn't say protect. I would say that it's given them access, but I don't know if it's always genuine. I don't know that they're always received for the beautiful minds that they do have. And it wasn't until my oldest one [Maasai] quit playing [football] that I think I realized that. The pandemic hit, and then the young men who were supposed to be drafted didn't get drafted. We had to make a tough decision, and he just said, "Mommy, I think I'm done." I said, "OK, let's do something else." He moved to New York and he got into NYU, and I'm so proud of Maasai. He really has a beautiful, beautiful mind. He's a really smart young man. He's smarter than me, actually. You want that for your kids. But I think what's tough for him is finding that group of young people who don't see him as my son first. And with social media, you can't hide from it. Not that he would want to, but I mean, I think it was a thing when he was in college, like "Man, your mom's Nia Long."

I would say that you are hotter than ever, arguably the hottest you've ever been, which is saying a lot. What do you love most about this version of yourself?
Ooh, the trust—that I'm able to trust my instincts completely. The knowingness, the grace, the acceptance of being wise enough. To remain young enough to stay open and have fun. It's freedom. One of my girlfriends asked me about two years ago: "If you could have one thing, what would you want?" I said, "Freedom." Freedom can mean so many different things for women, but for me in that moment, it meant the ability to do whatever I want to do when I want to do it and how I want to do it. And I have that.

You're very lucky. How long did it take you to get free?
I think it was years of grinding it out, never, ever lowering my standards. I mean to the point where I'm a pain in the ass for certain people, but I don't care. I want what I want, and I want it the way that I want it because I will work for it, not because I feel entitled.

Speaking of your hard work, what would you prefer: retiring in unlimited luxury in your late 60s, never working again; or working until your 80s, doing meaningful work that you love and having a comfortable lifestyle? You'd still have bags, but you'd also have a budget.
Does this mean I have to work nonstop between now and 80? I don't know. That's a tough one because I feel like a woman gets better with age, but I also feel like there's a certain point where you want to slow life down and don't want to have to work that hard. You want to work gracefully. You want to come in and do a couple of scenes and get those awards and go home, right? Yeah. All of it. But 65 feels a little—I'm going to still be hot at 65.

Absolutely.
I'm about to start dating. That's how hot it's about to get.

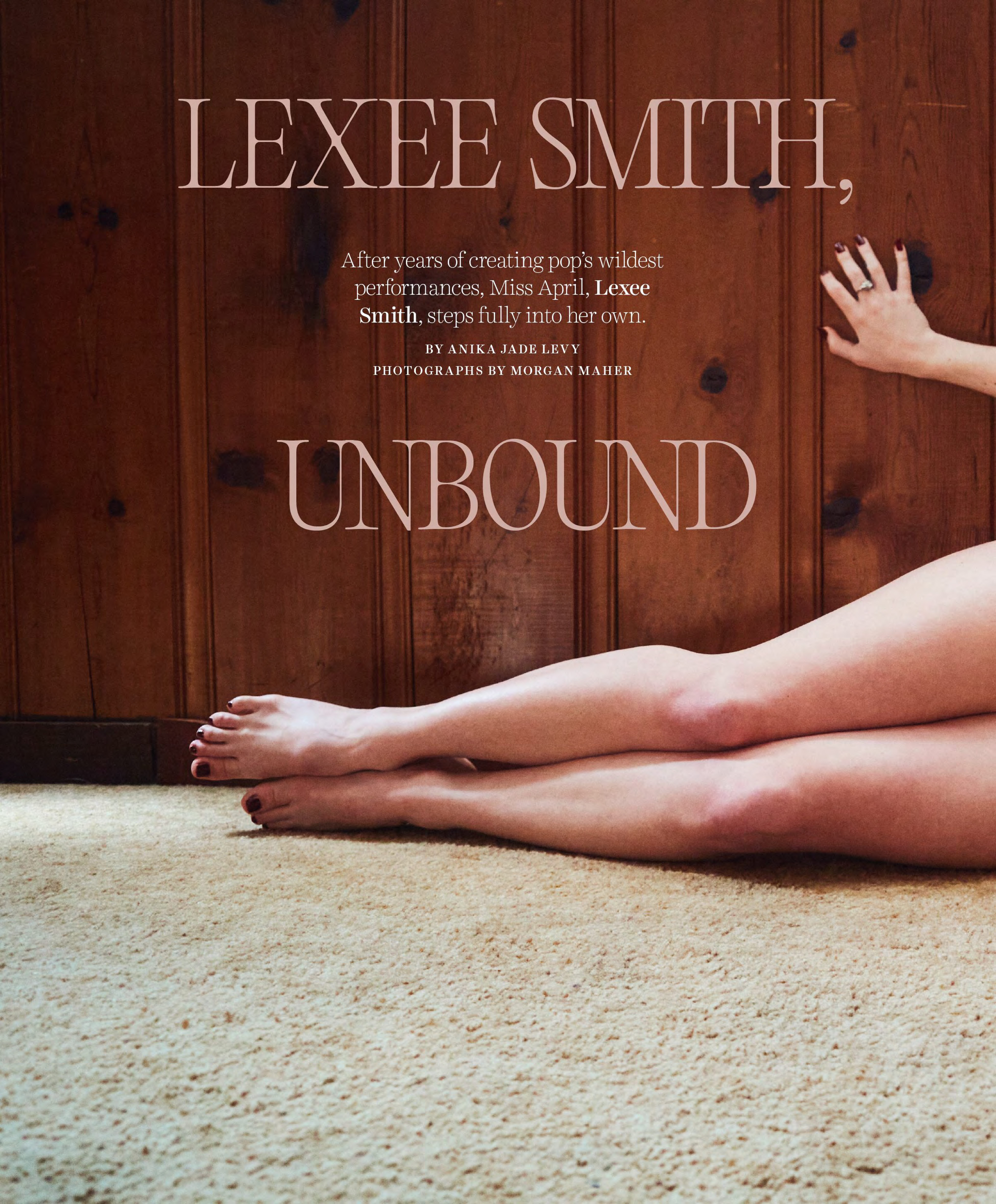
STYLIST: THE REISMANS. HAIR: SHAYLIN JONES. MAKEUP: JOANNA SIMKIN.

LEXEE SMITH, UNBOUND

After years of creating pop's wildest performances, Miss April, **Lexee Smith**, steps fully into her own.

BY ANIKA JADE LEVY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MORGAN MAHER



MISS APRIL

LEXEE SMITH

MISS APRIL

LEXEE SMITH

Lexee Smith has spent years building the performances that bring other people fame. If you watched Kim Kardashian crawl around on the floor in her "Santa Baby" video or saw Addison Rae casually pop into the splits on Instagram, you're already familiar with Smith's oeuvre. When she's on set with artists such as Billie Eilish and FKA Twigs, intimacy blurs authorship. As a movement director and creative consultant, she's had artists ask to swap outfits with her, borrow a gesture she improvised, and absorb something ineffable about her physical vocabulary. At one time, that might have felt like theft. Now she sees it as transmission. "If my spirit wants to be seen through another vessel," she says, "that's still me existing."

When she FaceTimes me, the 25-year-old is dressed for bed in a pink-and-white bathrobe, but her red lipstick is pressed into a perfect bow. She shifts her phone as she speaks, her heart-shaped face drifting in and out of frame like she's directing her own close-up. She lifts her arm to push hair from her eyes, and I notice faint bruises circling her wrist, marks left by the shibari rope she was bound in for her *Playboy* photo shoot.

These are the most revealing photographs she's ever taken, not just physically, but psychologically. For that reason, she insisted on choosing her collaborators: photographer Morgan Maher and stylist Lana Jay Lackey, both close friends. "Morgan does such a good job at capturing the purity in every woman, regardless of the circumstance. And it's easy to be tits-out in front of girls you love," she says matter-of-factly.

For someone whose career depends on visibility, Smith thinks about misinterpretation constantly. The more prominent she becomes, she says, the more precise her self-expression has to be. Earlier in her career she relied on control, constructing an archetype of girlish sexuality that's become omnipresent online—playful, approachable, and just dangerous enough. Recently, she's been forced to loosen her grip.

"I've built my life to become this fantasy," she tells me. "The wild woman. When I feel the sexiest, I feel like

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an animal." Inspired by vintage fetish pinups, she wanted the images to lean feral. She pushed the shoot into a territory she wasn't sure a legacy magazine would allow; at one point, her hands turned purple from the rope binding. She laughs when she remembers it. "I'm so comfortable naked," she says. "Part of my soul feels like I was a naughty nun in a past life. I either want to be completely covered or completely bare. There's a way to teeter between animal spirit fantasy and full sex god provocateur."

Her language returns again and again to embodiment. Confidence, to her, is a way of carrying yourself more than it is a mindset. When she describes it, she physically demonstrates: shoulders back, chest open, arms lifted to the sky. She recently saw a woman walk into a coffee shop with what she calls "perfect old-Hollywood posture" and found herself stunned by how rare that kind of poise is now. "You can blame people for not seeing you," she says. "But if you're not showing yourself, how are they supposed to?"

Every artist's signature, Smith says, evolves out of something they once considered a flaw. For her, it's her arms, which she describes as strong, not delicate. In a recent performance piece, she danced in black feathered bird wings. "I felt so powerful," she says. "It was like armor." Fashion has the same function for Smith: "Clothing should be a system for deciding what part of yourself wants to be seen and what wants protection." The problem with contemporary aesthetics, she thinks, is that people rely too heavily on reference: mood boards, trend cycles, algorithmic beauty standards. "What do you actually feel?" she says. "That's the real question."

For Smith, glamour is a practice, something she takes seriously: "We have the power to literally shape-shift if we charge our bodies with acceptance and start to give love to the things that we neglect." Lately, she's been reprogramming her routines—slowing down when she washes her face and brushes her teeth. Looking in the mirror, she asks herself, *How would I treat myself if I was the love of my life?*

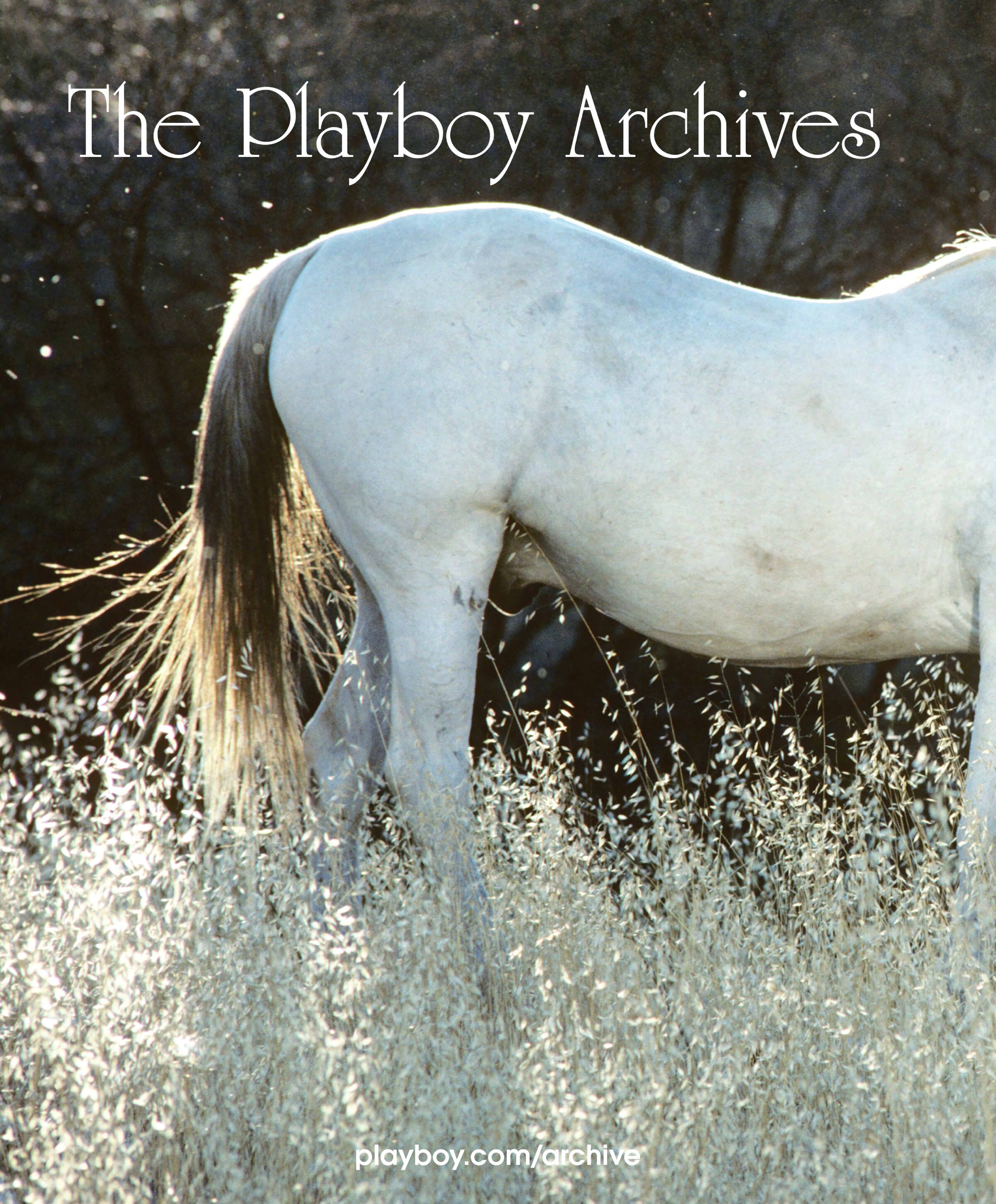
"When you're trying to embody the woman you want to be, it doesn't click until you let go of every idea about what you should be and just accept yourself," she says. "And that also means accepting the parts of yourself that are more childlike, parts of yourself you thought you had to abolish or make more beautiful in the process of trying to be sexy or womanly. You just have to accept attention in general, because there are always going to be moments when it's overwhelming and debilitating to be seen, but as soon as you can accept that everybody's seen it and they still love you, you're like, 'Wait, actually this is all on me. This is my personal experience.' "

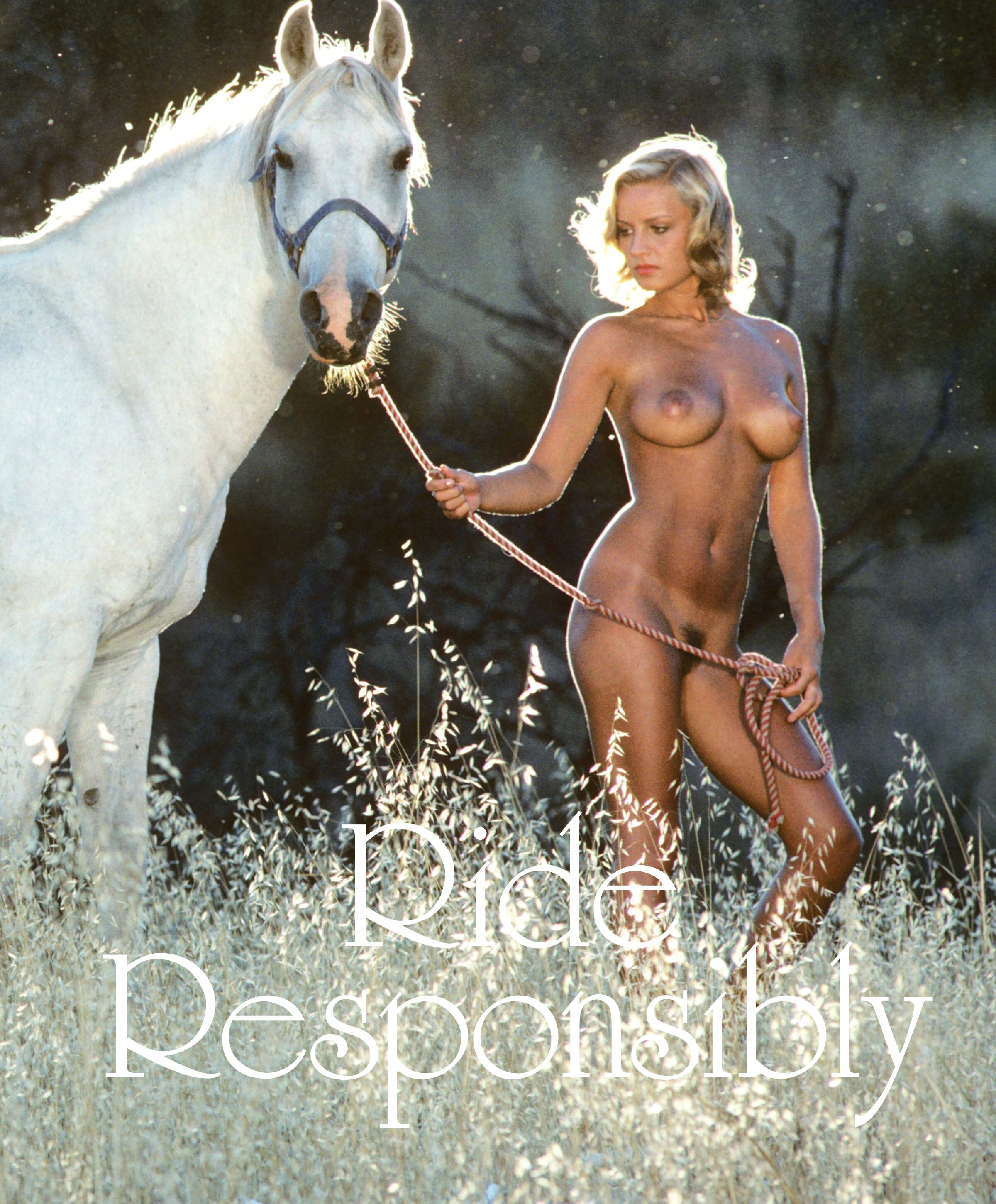
Though she's comfortable with exposure, Smith is protective of mystery. Social media, especially video platforms, make her uneasy because they flatten experience into constant disclosure. Her digital archive is unusual for a young woman—performances, fragments, abstractions, things that leave room for speculation. "I'm trying to be a legend," she says. "I don't want to show everybody everything. I want people to wonder what I'm eating." Certain parts of life, she insists, should remain gifts, shared only in intimacy. Without privacy, curiosity disappears. And without curiosity, why would anyone want to know you?

"But I'm really excited about *Playboy*," Smith says. "The photos are definitely wild compared to anything I've done. And as much as it scares me, I know it's going to make me feel really free."

By the end of our conversation, she's showing me how to do the splits against a wall, telling me to let gravity do the work. "Surrender," Smith instructs, "is always more effective than force."

STYLIST: LANA JAY LACKEY. HAIR: LAUREN PALMER-SMITH. MAKEUP: EDEN LATTANZIO. MANICURIST: STEPH STONE. SET DESIGN: MILENA GORUM. SHIBARI ARTIST: COCO CELESTE. PRODUCTION: SERIE YOON.


The Playboy Archives
playboy.com/archive


Ride Responsibly

The Naked Truth

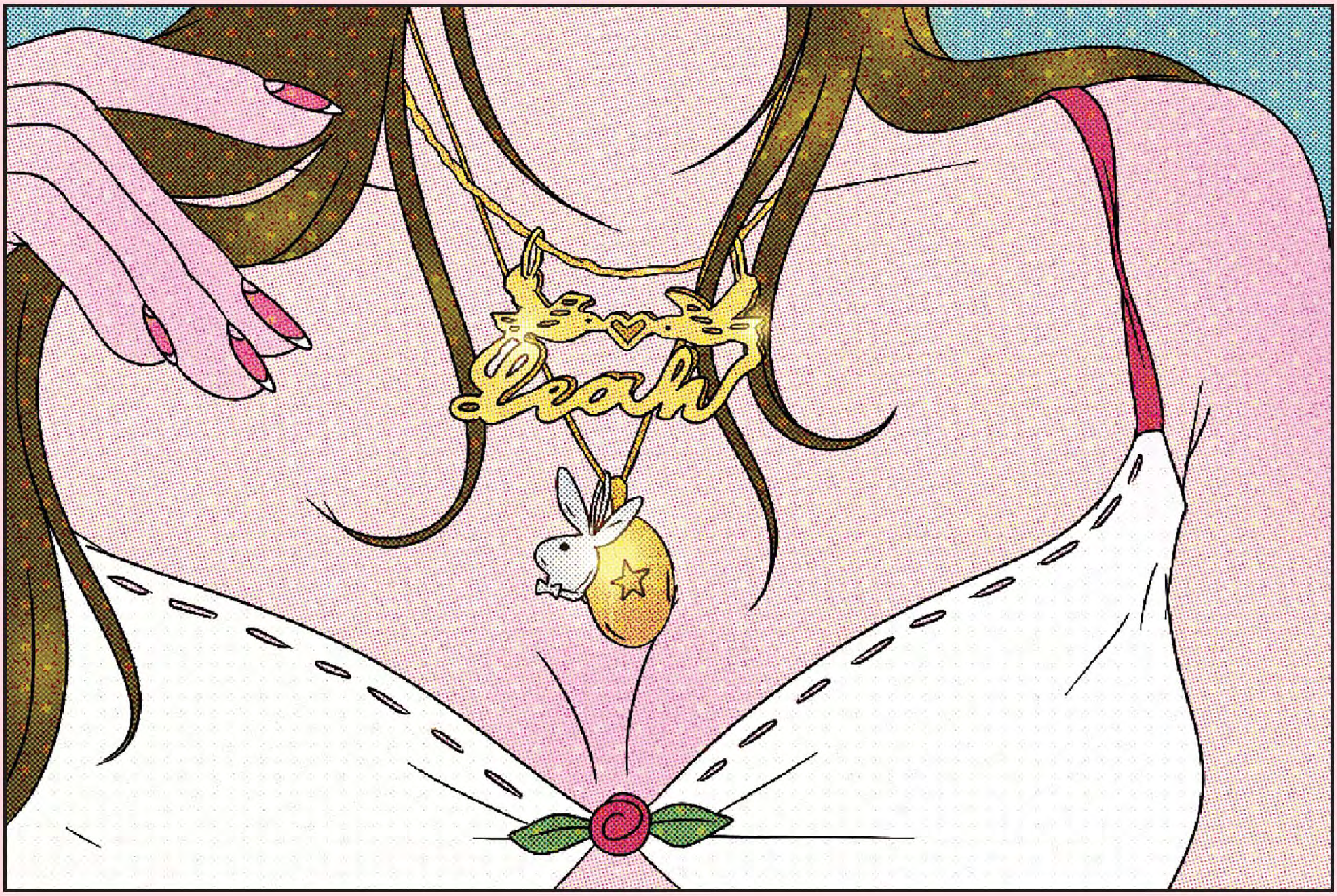
Chad Moore continues a *Playboy* tradition: turning the camera on the woman he loves.

FOR NEW YORK–BASED PHOTOGRAPHER Chad Moore, nudity is a way to avoid time, or escape it entirely. Strip away the clothes and the phones, and an image loses its decade. "It could be anytime, anyplace," he says.

And yet everything Moore shoots carries a personal time stamp. Since breaking out more than a decade ago, he has treated his work as a diary: a running document of friends, lovers, and landscapes; a record of intimate moments. This series features Del, his girlfriend and frequent collaborator, including an image of her nude under the Brooklyn Bridge shot in the dead of winter. Moore scouted the location the day before, checking tide tables and mapping the light. Execution took 15 minutes, with Del naked in 23-degree air. "When you're using someone's body for your artwork, they have to really trust you," he says.

Moore doesn't consider the work erotic: "Nudity is not very sexualized to me. I've seen all my friends naked." His method, informed in part by early work with Ryan McGinley—whom he calls "the big brother I never had"—is based on locking in an environment, then stepping back: "You let it be based on contingency. You see how they act within the place." Del has full veto power throughout their collaborations. In Moore's telling, the power dynamic is simple: "She's the one in control. You're just kind of there. You have to be grateful." —**JESSE WILL**

MODEL: DELANEY ANDERSON



LEAH

By Sean Thor Conroe

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **SUNNY WU**

It was late summer, I'd been moved to the city two months, didn't really know anyone yet. Just working every job I could get, set-building on a day rate basis, stacking as much as I could before classes started and I'd have much less, if any, time to take day rate jobs. Tail end of a week I worked each day of. Capped by a three-day build building flats, like 50 of them, for an Amazon commercial shoot.

The job had gone smoothly once I got the hang of things, no longer having to be hypervigilant, constantly asking how to do what, like I'd been the first day.

And once I got the hang of things, becoming as much like a machine as possible, by the waning moments of that Day Three Sunday, out front the warehouse loading and Tetris-ing the last of the flats into the chock-full box truck, to be shipped out to the commercial shoot site, no longer even considering things like whether I was exerting my allotted energy amount; just loading shit in, demanding people tandem shit with me. Unbothered by the more withdrawn last-minute call-ins, friends of regulars, off in the corner of the lot covertly smoking cigs while pretending to do things, so as to slide by.

That shit didn't matter to me; all that mattered was trading being a temporary machine in order to become a human again.

When deprived of the ability to be a human, how invigorating those first moments when you were allowed to be one again.

If I'm honest, the only other time I'd ever worked this physically and constantly, maxing myself out for whole workweeks, such that I was tired out enough at the end of each day to actually sleep, was the summer I worked as a camp counselor. Way back when.

With Leah, whom I'd recently, upon moving to the city and discovering she lived here already, reconnected with.

With similar elements, that summer, of: Completing a task that needed to be completed—the growing sense of fidelity to the project, now; and the sense of responsibility to the kiddos who looked to you to show up each day, then. Also similarly: Having that workplace crush to perform for—Zoe, on this job, who I knew from previous jobs, always charged energy, how adeptly she moved around puttying and painting, exercising the same care she brought to the set design movie work she generally did, edges of her fraying shirt encasing full maternal breasts all paint-streaked up.

Not that I was over here ogling. Just that awareness.

Eye out for each other for when we were about to pop out for a smoke. Syncopating these breaks. During which she'd look at me like… *You*. And then tell me all about her washed-up aimless ex she'd just, after a year of aimless cohabitation, finally kicked out.

This energy. This reciprocal workplace sexualizing.

This was generative.

Was what pushed me, during the lull while waiting for the box truck to arrive, once all the walls built, once only cosmetic tasks left, to hop into the assembly line, putty tub and scraper tool in hand, to once-over all the scuffs and unintentional perforations in the walls we'd built—that our carelessness had made—to instill them with a facade of blemishlessness.

So I could work near her.

And that shit wasn't easy, to make it not glob.

Took a different kind of wrist finesse. A different type of touch.

But Leah must have sensed something, how much I'd been reminded of her. Because she reached out that week.

I was at my street-facing fifth-floor window in Harlem, two tallboys in, chain-smoking out the window fan.

And just like that we were back. Quick texts back and forth, holding space for each other. Inviting continued communication by our insistence on never saying a thing straight. To avoid ever saying the actual thing.

She'd been living in the city the past two years, with her boyfriend from undergrad. Teaching English to kids in the Bronx.

Only she was moving. Back to California. To apply to law school.

And she, too, had just kicked her boyfriend out. Of the spot they'd gotten together.

How you mean. He ok? Where's he live now?

No he's good. He's at his parents.

In the city?

In a brownstone. In the village.

We decided to meet up later that week.

I didn't decide where we would meet, I didn't take the lead, I still didn't know anywhere. Just went where she told me to.

Random outdoor beer garden up by where she stayed, 145th-ish. On the water.

In this vestibule area between the highway, sorta under it, and the waterside biking path.

By this part of Washington Heights—seemingly sleepier than Harlem, some parts hillier-seeming, winding side paths and schools—where it dipped down sharply, all abruptly, to the water.

We were the only ones in the outdoor patio area. It was a weird time, like 2 p.m. Picnic tables interspersed throughout at weird angles. Umbrellas over some, but not ours. Off to the side, far out from the open-walled indoor area but not all the way out. Not streetside.

I was facing inside, my back to the street.

It had been seven years to the summer, we realized.

"Which is so weird," I said, coming in hot like, "I'd *just* been thinking about seven-year cycles, my mom is always going on about them. How they're tied to the world-kingdoms, age 1 to 7 being rock; 7 to 14, plant; 14 to 21, animal; and 21 to 28—where I'm at now, am about to end—human," raising my eyebrows like *Right?*

Seriously giddy but ramping it up some in case she shut me down.

She just stared at me across the table, scrutinizing me.

Like *Why are you like this.*

So you're still like this.

"So… What does that mean for now?"

"I mean… I'm a human now! I've just finally become one."

She wouldn't tell me what had happened with her boyfriend directly. Seemingly waiting to see if any of it was worth telling. Or waiting to see which parts, what version was.

She wouldn't tell me till we started walking.

I'd do this thing with the kiddos that summer with her, seven ago.

There'd be this stretch every afternoon, just after lunch, where there'd be this lull, ideally it was nap time. How young the kids I stuck with were, the five- to six-year-olds. The least desirable age, was the consensus, given how incapable they were of doing anything on their own. Or—the period was actually the "games" period. Which, if done effectively, could lead to a nap. If you tired 'em out. But kids that age, they were too young to play any games. Too young to organize themselves into sports. Not to mention, at that time of day, after lunch, they'd start to get cranky. Without finessing this right, this could lead to kids crying, hurting themselves, a nightmare.

But kids that age, they were also so unformed. So malleable.

So what I did was, I'd take 'em on these romps. Into the woods, down to a creek, back again. The whole while holding their attention with this ongoing saga I off-the-cuff riffed. "The Adventures of Purple Purple Bunny and…" some other colored animal. Telling them they, this made-up creature-duo, went here, did this, got into that snafu, only… Then they got out!

But stalling, holding off, on when they got out.

Checking every nook and corner of their world, to see what they could find, before they did.

The kiddos dangling off of me, begging me to tell them what they did next.

What happened after that?!

Doing exaggerated lament-yells when I went "Nope! Didn't make it home free yet!" ensnaring Purple Purple Bunny into yet another rigmarole.

Like NoOOOOOo! falling to their knees.

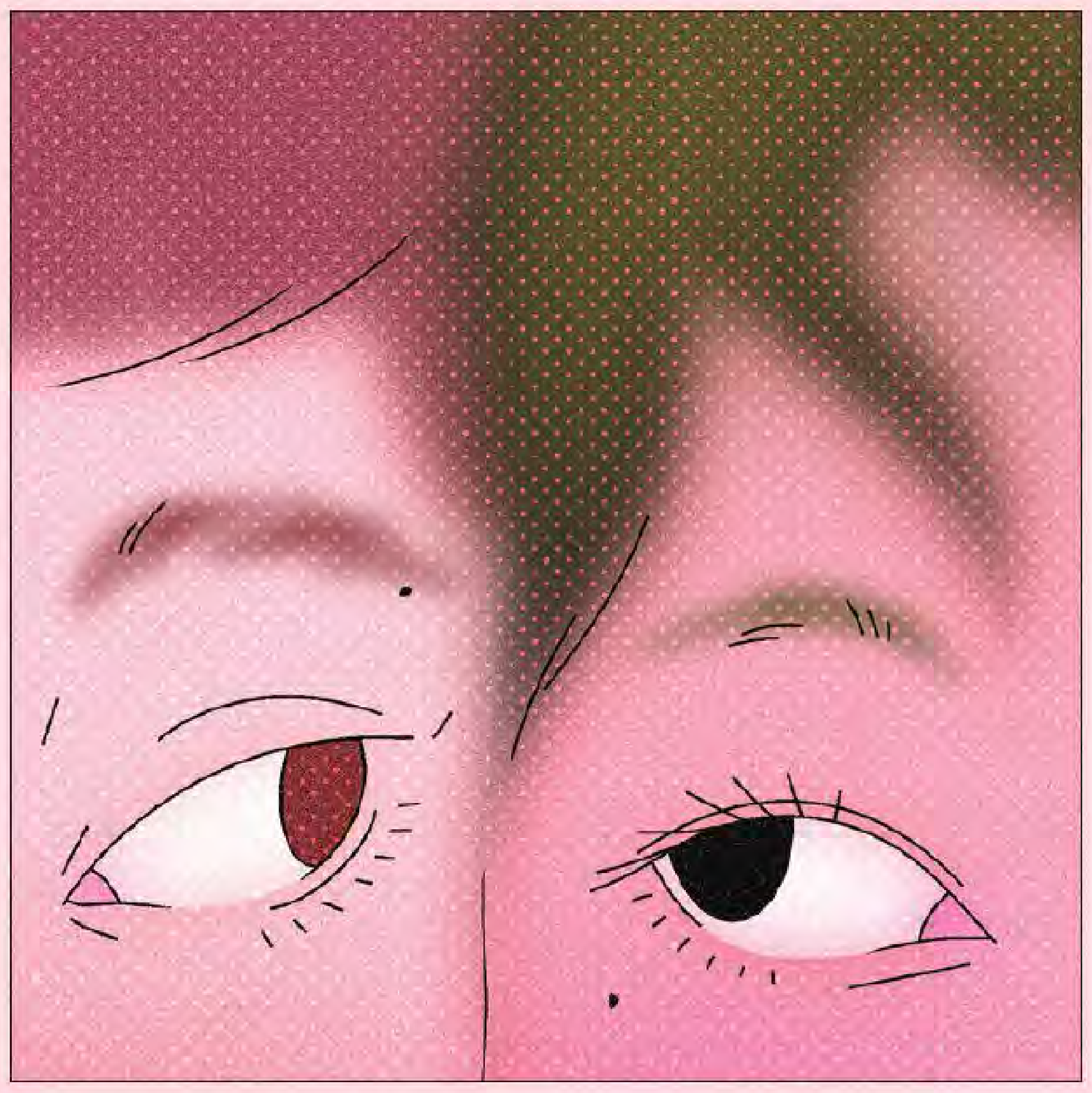
Withholding what happened till just the moment they needed to before losing interest.

But then always having the path, the one we were walking on, to revert to, when it came to it. To direct their attention back to. When they got too excited about what was happening in the story and forgot we were still moving around, in the world.

One fortnightly session I'd done with Leah. What started us.

How suddenly her watching me with them made me want to perform myself in a way that was good to them. Knowing someone you cared about was watching… Pushed you to do things you never considered you could.

She seemed happy about this, my endless riffing. Since, no matter what weird god complex I was playing out, manipulating their imaginations like I was, she didn't have to partake.



She could rest.

Chiding me when I made some euphemism that was inappropriate to them, but that they couldn't understand. That only she could.

Affronted at the irreverence. But also not wanting me to stop.

We sat in the beer garden, bantering. Sharing some things but not really sharing anything. Seeing what seemed OK to share.

Baffled at the time passed; about how, in some ways, things were so different now; yet how, in others, they were exactly alike.

I was excited.

I tried to sip slow, talk slow, ask thoughtful questions, and nod encouragingly when she spoke. To show "I listened."

Probably putting a strain on her by doing so, by not just unselfconsciously, belligerently taking the lead.

I didn't do that.

Overthinking everything, convinced this was more thoughtful.

No one else entering the garden the whole time we were there. Squinting in direct sun. Basking. The elevated highway humming steady on one side. And the water, on the other side of the other highway on the opposite side, giving us periodic gusts. Beckoning.

ABOUT HALFWAY TO WHERE WE WOULD WALK, about a mile north, where the riverside path opened up into a field, a baseball diamond, with direct shore access, picnic tables pocking the lawn, Leah looked at me darkly, distantly, sorta scoffing but cryptically. Withdrew. In a way I genuinely couldn't understand the meaning of. What feeling it conveyed.

The feeling it made me feel reminded me of the feeling I felt late that camp summer, at some end-of-summer counselor hang that one of our co-counselors hosted, some secluded spot up Highway 9, deep into the mountains, limited if any service, the stress of the daily example-setting, collectively, and the accumulated energy of a summer's worth of stop-start flirting between us releasing suddenly, puncturing, flowing forth once the booze, the 30-racks, the handles we'd hauled up there in caravanned cars started flowing.

Something childish and giddily juvenile about a hang like that, all mobbing up together, gossiping/hearsaying about who was or wasn't staying over.

Our turn to be the kiddos now.

All that night leaving it open whether I would mob back with Ryan, my main guy that summer. Who lived in San Jose.

So sorta outta the way, to drive me back.

We'd see.

The night blurring like nights do when that sauced.

But the part that didn't blur, the part that mattered, that got seared onto the mnemonic epitaph of that night by her look. Leah's.

In some side room, probably the bedroom of whoever's house we were at. That we were, at a certain point, no longer viewing as someone's house. That we were using as if it were ours. That we'd wandered into.

But not just us. It was a bunch of us. In my head mainly girls.

And not with any erotic intentions. But playfully.

Like *Let's all lie down here! Let's crash here—I'm crashing here!*

Everyone lying, side by side, like peas in a pod play-napping.

I hesitated; then, when told to by another counselor, joined at the end.

Behind Leah. Big-spooning her. In a way I think she wanted.

Head against her neck, that was all good, she held my head against hers.

But when I expanded and pressed up against her. And she felt that.

She might have wanted that, too.

But it was how tangible that made it. What we were doing.

No longer under the guise of workplace banter.

That her boyfriend was her boyfriend and I was me all too real.

That's when she turned and looked at me darkly like that, like she was hurt I'd done what I'd done. Had let what happened happen.

Like *We can't do…that.*

I drove home with Ryan that night.

And that was the closest we ever got.

So when she looked at me like that this time, upon my asking how things were with her boyfriend, why she was leaving him, I thought, *Same as before*.

She wanted something but, ultimately, at the last minute, was unable to take it. To allow herself to be taken.

Little proper Leah, tied to her propriety, her Catholic roots.

And when she got called out on the dissonance between her talk and her walk—when looked upon patronizingly, if sweetly, for holding back at the last minute, just like last time—she went dark, withdrawing.

Was what I thought she felt, this time, walking along the river path, dodging joggers, when I jabbed her about her breakup.

"So you guys are living together, in New York City, everything is good till… Things get too real and you kick him out?" laughing. Transposing her old self, my perception of it, directly onto her current one.

Only, when we finally got to that clearing and stopped. To rest a sec. Sitting on top this picnic table moored randomly, at an angle, on a shoreside slant. Feet up on the benches. Facing out onto the water.

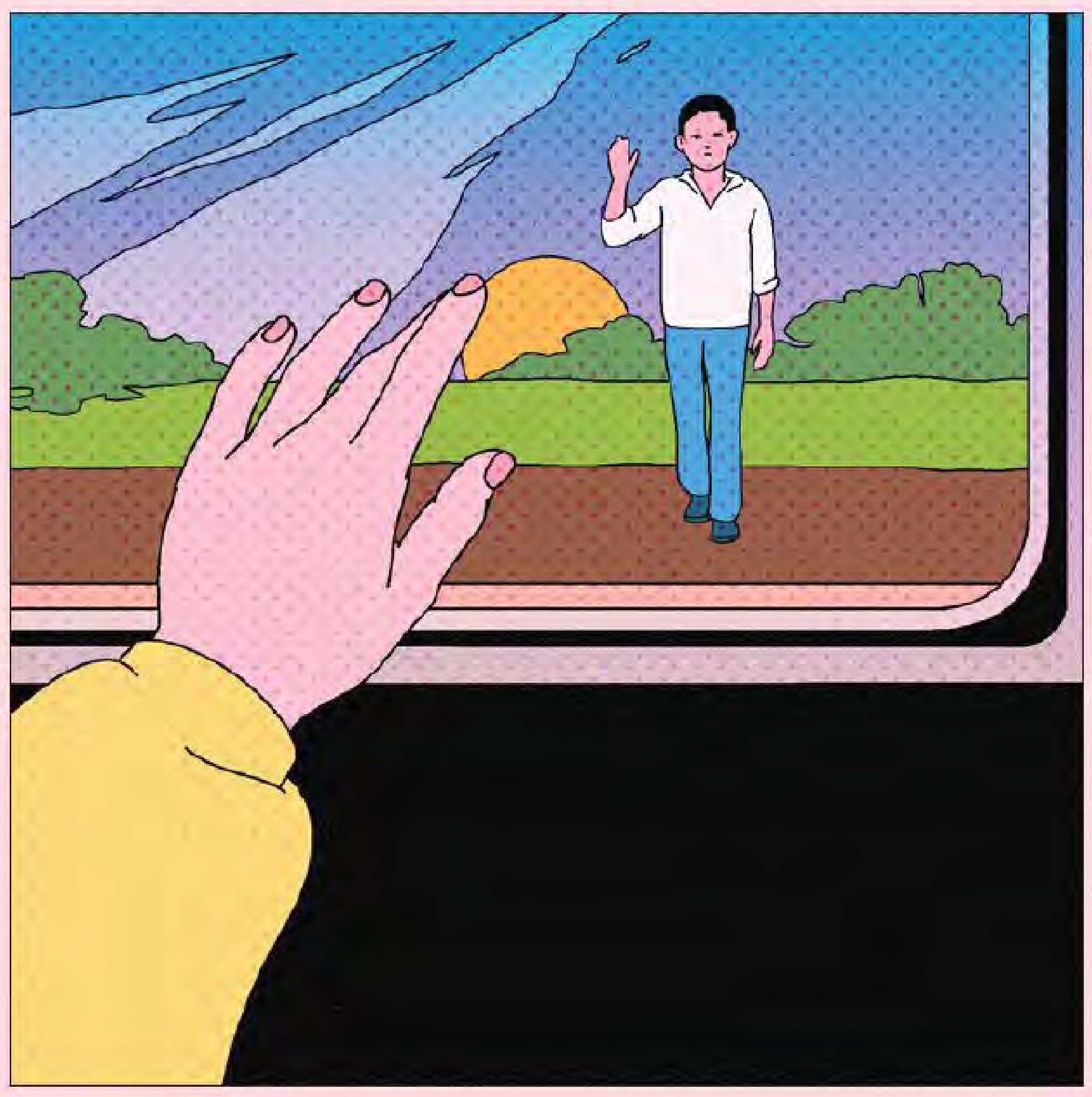
That wasn't what it actually was.

"What it actually was, why I kicked him out, was," she said. "That wedding I told you about? That I was bridegroom at?"

I nodded, those wedding photos being one of the first I saw, on her profile, when I initially thought of her and looked her up.

"So there was this guy there. And. Yeah."

"No."



"Yeah."

"You followed through this time," the "this time" hanging in the air awkwardly, metallically, till she caught it, unflinching, and went, "Yeah, I followed through." Knowing exactly what I meant.

Like she remembered all I was remembering.

"And you told him? Your boyfriend?"

She hadn't. Nor planned to.

She'd be back in California in a fortnight.

Once she was, she'd told him, he could move back in.

Feeling mystified by this version of her, who'd do that. Like *How could she.* Almost.

Not; but almost.

And seemingly involuntarily.

But this was good. Seeing that.

That that Leah was no longer this one.

That people could always act outside of how they previously had.

How you'd previously perceived that they could.

THAT EXTEMPORANEOUSNESS OF A RELATIONSHIP with a clear timeline, akin to the one-night-only passing-throughness of the Traveler. That was a thing. The convo excitedly frantic, the texting electric, that next week. The penultimate week.

A week later, we linked where we ended up—where the river path spat us out—last time. Waterside state park up on 145th, that's just somehow there. A state park. In the middle of the city.

Continued from where the path left off, last time.

This time prepared with a sixer and plastic cups.

Copping shit-beer tallboys for myself, getting her some kooky high-percentage IPA I assumed her "type" would like.

I assumed right. She liked it.

The circumstances of course totally different, naturally, because time and space, but also totally identical: Me totally open, unbound, romantically; she one-foot-out with a boy she was nonetheless still domestically connected to, about to skip town to pursue a higher level of education, that her sort-of boyfriend wouldn't be moving with her to (though nor, either time, would I be). Undergrad, last time; law school, this.

Sitting same as last time, butts on the picnic tabletop and feet on the benches, she told me, breathlessly, about how, if she'd learned anything teaching, literacy was everything.

Literacy the ultimate leveling plane.

I got excited by this, and encouraged her to keep going, thinking about where this line of thinking had led me, that I agreed, literacy was everything, only a problem with the most obvious solution to this problem—fund more literacy! through school!—was that this assumed a static standard for what literacy entailed, for what language was legitimate, and so the higher-level move was to play with that, let other modes of speech into domains they weren't permitted previously, were deemed too low to be, by learning both languages, the infiltrating one and the one being infiltrated, so fluently that the integration was seamless, slippery, undismissible…

Thinking all this, but not saying it.

If I cut her off and said it, she would then know it. And might even think me more impressive for articulating it. For showing that I'd spent time thinking about something she, clearly, felt to be central to her purpose to an almost, and an inspiringly, spiritual degree.

But then I'd miss out on anything she might say, intuitively stumble into, that would add to this, my stock spiel on it.

That might complicate it.

I stayed silent.

She continued.

Jersey skyline across the way lit up waning-day orange and burning.

A young couple, high school–looking, at an adjacent table, he sitting on the head of the tabletop, feet dangling, she standing and leaning up against him, between his legs, playfully declining his nuzzle-cajoling.

"There's actually this specific group of Oaxacans, a bunch of them, in Watsonville…" *Santa Cruz–adjacent town that's almost unanimously Mexican migrant farmer, agricultural. Strawberries and artichokes, mostly. Where everyone besides me and the coach's son on the Santa Cruz County Class 1 traveling soccer team I played for from sixth through eighth grades were from, and whose parents unanimously called me* mijo, *assuming I was Mexican,* I thought but didn't say. "And their literacy, their path to attaining it, is even more complicated because their language, under a hundred people still speak it. It's not just about learning English. This boy I worked with, who'd just come over here, the language he grew up speaking, within his lifetime, will no longer be a spoken language."

Raising my eyebrows at this, realizing here why something had told me to stay silent earlier.

Not even a possibility to integrate the language counterintuitively and subversively into other linguistic spheres when literally no one no longer spoke the language.

Damn.

"And that boy. The things he needs to overcome to just join the conversation—"

"To just even join the conversation!"

"I want to help him be able to."

"Through law now."

"Through law. Through changing laws."

Noting, again, where her path, despite its overlaps, deviated from mine.

This faith in the system. In top-down change.

Whether or not you believed in the benevolent government-father.

The great divide. You either did or didn't.

Had to have had something, if not everything, to do with whether or not you believed in yours.

Whether you had one to choose whether or not to believe in, I mean.

"And so you're writing about that? About that boy? For your apps?"

Her eyes lighting up when I said that. Like *How was I unable to see something so obviously urgent as the most urgent thing.*

"Send me something about that," I said, doing the deciding for her. Since she'd said her app essays were a mess and would I help her.

Unable to resist reentering into the private intimacy of shared writing. Not to mention. Seizing an opportunity, finally, to decisively guide her.

WE MET UP ONE MORE TIME. Before the decided future moment that had bound all that time we'd been spending, that had filled it with all its meaning and urgency, came crashing violently and abruptly into the present.

This last time felt different. No longer protecting herself, testing her trust in me, with a casual attitude/attire, unembroidered appearance.

I biked up to where she was, that part didn't change. To a corner on 145th but inland, up top the hill that led up from the state park to that first north-south thoroughfare through Washington Heights there. To find her waiting for me. In a summer dress.

Holding a purse.

Looking, smelling like a damn flower.

Looking beautiful.

She said there was this Indian spot. Her Indian spot.

"No one's ever in there. We can have it all to ourselves."

The talk, the energy the same, the escalation steady.

The time had come. At long last. After all that waiting that came before.

Everything inexorably headed one way.

She admitting halfway through our chicken tikka masalas, our second bottle, that her apartment—her boyfriend's apartment that she'd kicked him out of—was basically upstairs from here. From this restaurant.

A couple spots over.

Empty and accessible.

Going slightly shook at that. Excited and shook.

Wondering whether actions could change fate's course.

Wondering whether I'd even want to change it, if I could.

Out front after paying the check, forestalling the decision. Newly observing something masculinely athletic about her, out on the sidewalk, in the shadows of a storefront nook, out of light-shot of the adjacent deli further down, in how she stood watching me, hand on her hip, waiting to see what I decided, whether or not I would. Despite all the girl clothes.

I was the one who had to react to her advances now.

Stalling over a cig, sorta going towards my bike, fiddling with the lock key, then standing and presenting myself to her. Then advancing on her assertively. Before falling back and muttering "I shouldn't," and turning back to my bike.

"We'll kill all this. Kill something. If we do," I finally said.

She shrugged like *Your choice. Your loss.*

Like *Now who's cowering*, smiling like she'd won something.

"Send me your writing!" I said. "About the boy. The lost language.

"We can keep talking that way."

She sent me her essay a couple months later, well into the semester. Long after she'd left. I read it immediately. I thought of a whole slew of ideas that first read, heart beating, locked in. I started to jot 'em, but then said, *No, I'll print this and do it thorough. Do it completely. Do it perfect.*

I never did it.

I stalled a couple times, texted excuses that I was gonna.

Then she submitted it.

And got in!

She didn't need me.

But she could have. By stalling, faltering, not acting on that initial, truest impulse, I'd lost out on the chance to find out if she did.

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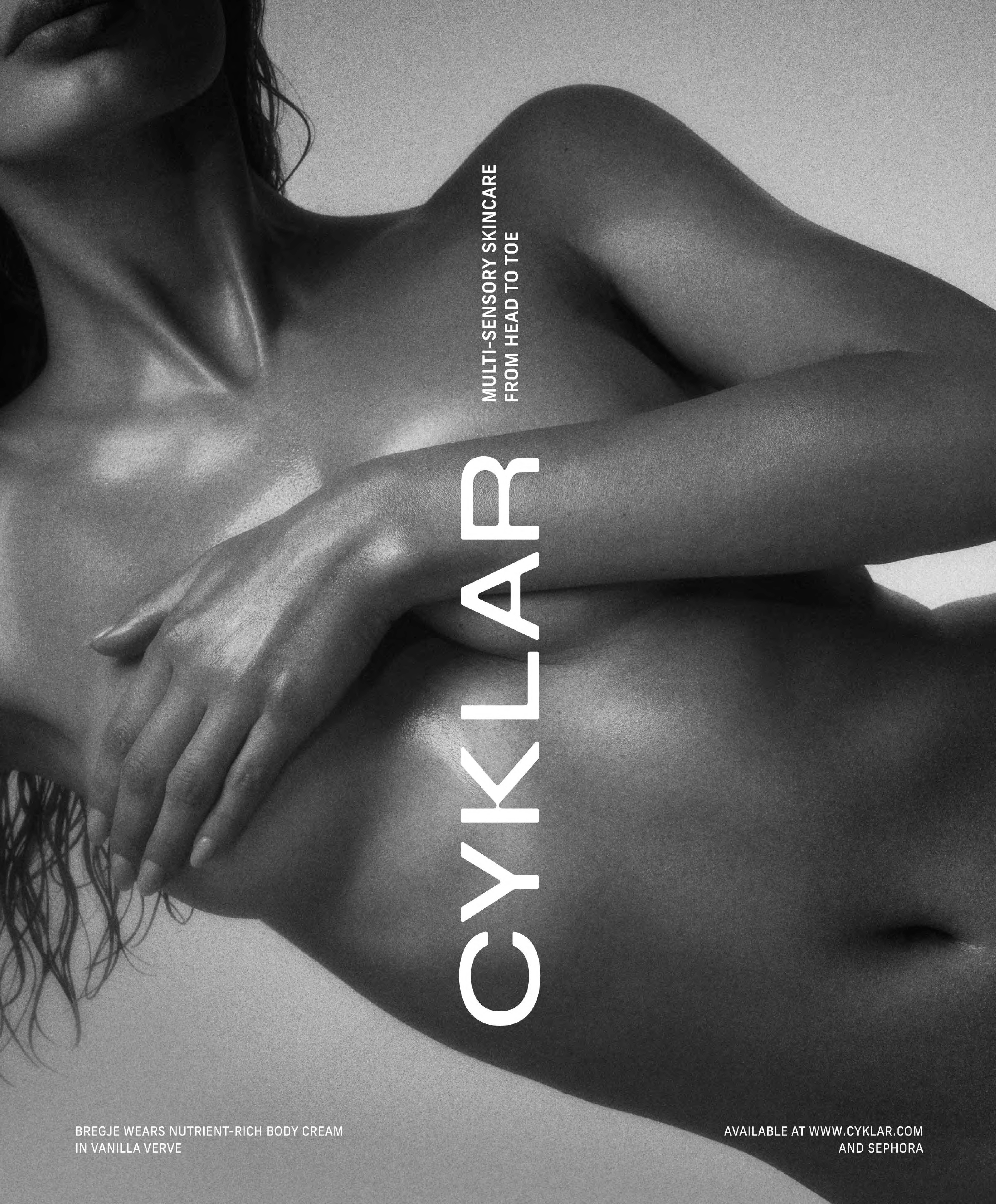
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The Nightcap

Meet the Miso Manhattan: a twist on a classic that makes the best possible case for one more drink.

COME UP FOR A NIGHTCAP?” These words slip out easily when you’re not quite ready to call it a night after a date gone well. But no need to worry about what comes next: You’re prepared. As you head toward your freshly tidied abode, you might inquire if they’ve ever tried miso vermouth. No? It’s so complex, you’ll say. The perfect hit of umami. It’s hard for anyone to resist.

Inside, the glasses are polished. The ice is on standby. The firewood stacked and ready. You dim the lights and press play on the perfect playlist. “Miso Manhattan?” you ask, while igniting the fire. If whiskey isn’t their thing, a pour of the miso vermouth neat or on the rocks makes an equally compelling case.

Offer a Luxardo cherry as a sticky-sweet opener, skewering two more for the drinks. Stir the whiskey, vermouth, and bitters over ice before straining into a coupe. Garnish. Clink. Toast. With the first sip, let the salty miso notes linger on the tongue before enjoying a cherry from the cocktail pick. The night, it turns out, is just getting started.

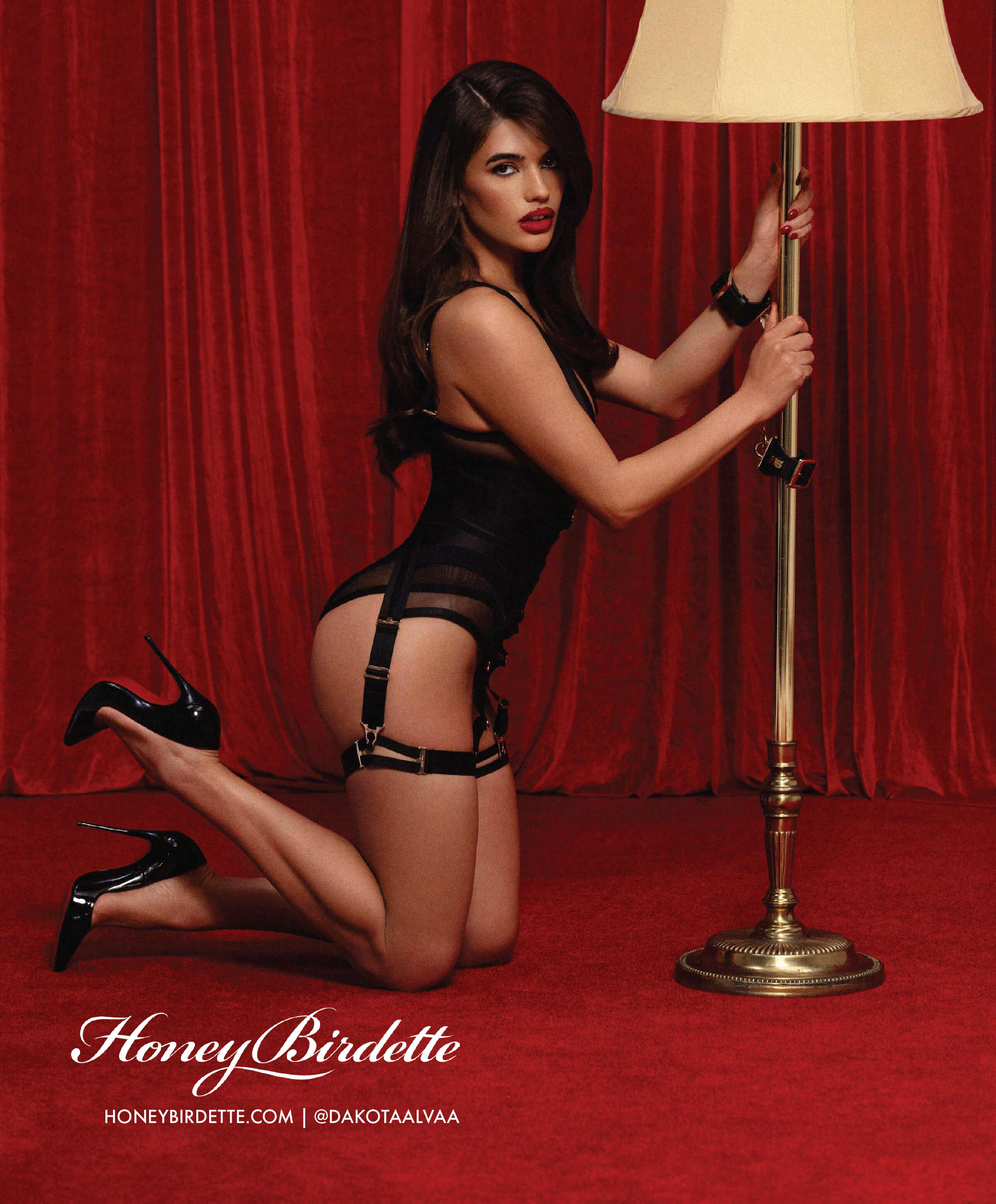
—**LESLIE KIRCHHOFF**

MISO MANHATTAN

2 ounces **rye whiskey or bourbon**
1 ounce **Veso Miso Sweet Vermouth**
1 dash **aromatic bitters**
Luxardo maraschino cherries, for garnish

Fill a mixing glass with ice. Add the whiskey, vermouth, and bitters and stir to combine. Strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with 2 cherries on a cocktail pick.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **LESLIE KIRCHHOFF**



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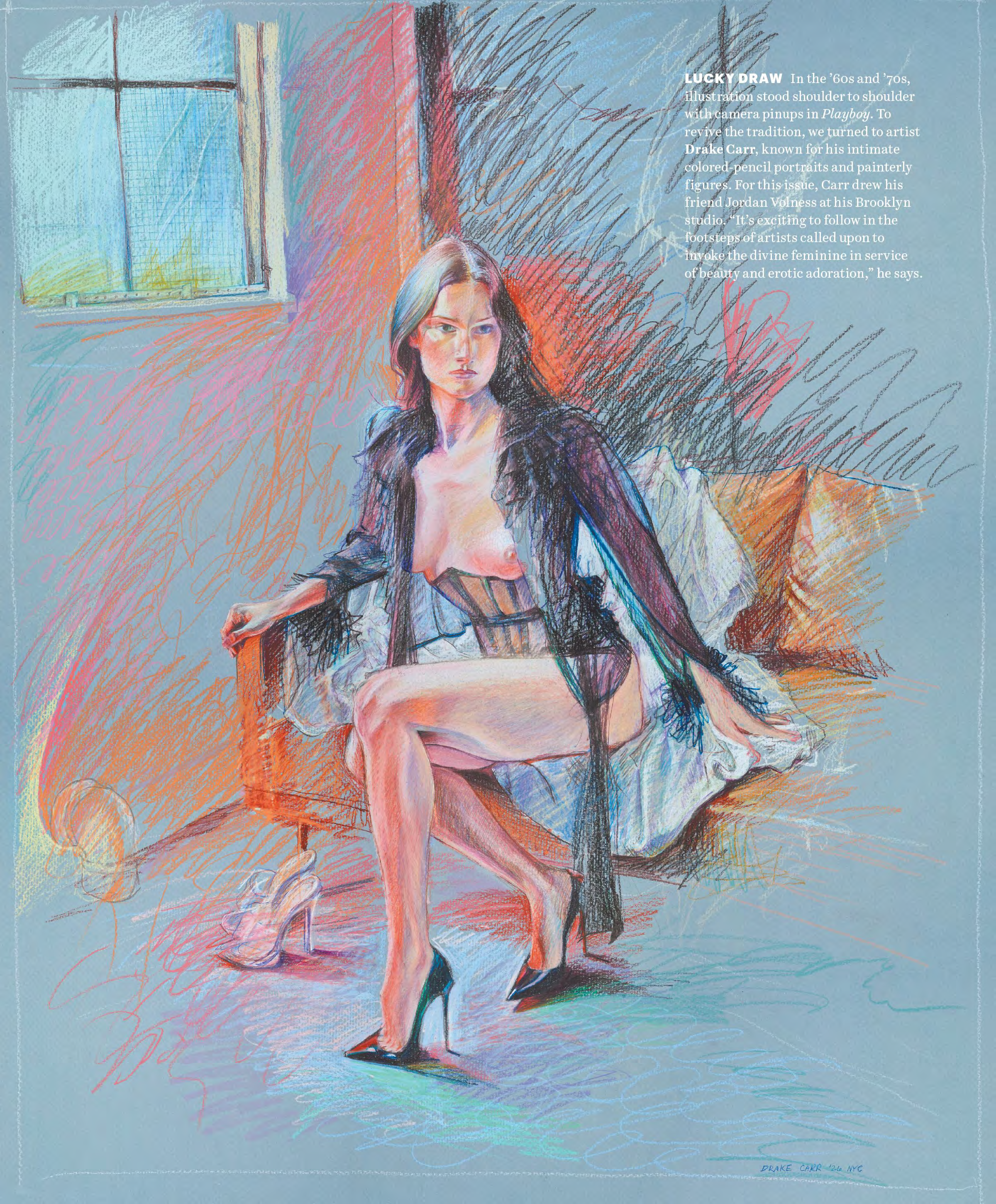

LUCKY DRAW In the '60s and '70s, illustration stood shoulder to shoulder with camera pinups in *Playboy*. To revive the tradition, we turned to artist **Drake Carr**, known for his intimate colored-pencil portraits and painterly figures. For this issue, Carr drew his friend Jordan Volness at his Brooklyn studio. "It's exciting to follow in the footsteps of artists called upon to invoke the divine feminine in service of beauty and erotic adoration," he says.

PLAYBOY